

## 'Towards the 21st Century' Revisited <Part 4>

### Involving with community as a new fruit farmer

I am a member of the Regional Revitalization Cooperation Team in Mito City (see AAI News No. 116). The activities vary depending on the requests of the local government or communities. In my case, I am positioned as a member of "farmer-type cooperation team" that utilizes official agricultural preparation funds, and I was expected to settle in the local community as a new farmer. The Mito Tourism Orchard Gardening Association, where I trained, was established in 1972, and once had as many as 23 members. However, there are only 10 members now, and the number is decreasing due to aging.

If one is to become a fruit farmer, it is best to take over an existing orchard and gradually renew the fruit trees while earning some income. However, it is not always possible to



Drilling a well on rented farmland

inherit an orchard that is in good condition and at an appropriate time. Most farmers wish to continue farming for as long as they can work, and gradually give up the orchards as trees age and are attacked by disease. In the second year of my training, I was entrusted with the management of two separate orchards; growing grapes and Japanese pear trees with the intention of taking over their management. At the same time, I leased several other pieces of vacant land and began managing a total of six scattered farmlands.

The experienced farmers repeatedly offered advice along the lines of "There is no way to manage so many trees from the beginning as a farmer." However, I could not afford to wait for conveniently concentrated orchard areas in good condition. Unless one is renting farmland and planting seedlings there is no prospect of becoming an independent farmer. By managing the fruit trees by myself throughout a year, I learned techniques for fruit growing and managing farms. Moreover, I was able to get closer to the neighboring farmers by experiencing the hardships and rewards which are difficult to obtain as an outside observer.

In the vineyard, which had been nonproductive for several years due to disease, the garden owner requested that the vines should be managed without cutting down the existing trees. As a measure against disease, I installed partial rain covers. Although I could reap a harvest, the disease recurred in the non-covered parts while the covered trees were not much affected. After observing that rain covers are more effective than spraying pesticides, the owner gradually understood and decided to bequeath the garden to me.

Regarding the pear garden, I maintained the trees for a year. However, the owner pointed out that the grass in the garden was not mowed in a timely manner. Then he stated at this point that it would be better



Grapes ripening under rain covers

to leave the land vacant rather than pass it along to other persons. After further discussions, I gave up on the prospect of inheriting the pear garden. Although I was disappointed that my efforts were not rewarded, I realized that it was quite difficult to grow multiple fruit trees with inexperienced skills. In the third and last year of my training, I decided to narrow my focus to three gardens, approximately one hectare in size, and prioritized planting my own seedlings and becoming an independent fruit farmer.

Even within the same community, residents have different views regarding land assets. Farmers tend to be conservative. Some farmers have a sense of shame about lending their farmland to others. As a newcomer, it is important to build trust over time while respecting the local people protecting their land. Becoming a fruit farmer is one way to interact with communities. Being a farmer requires a high level of commitment because it involves natural and cultural assets namely the farmland and the fruit trees themselves. This involvement however enables one to achieve a deeper understanding of the local community.