

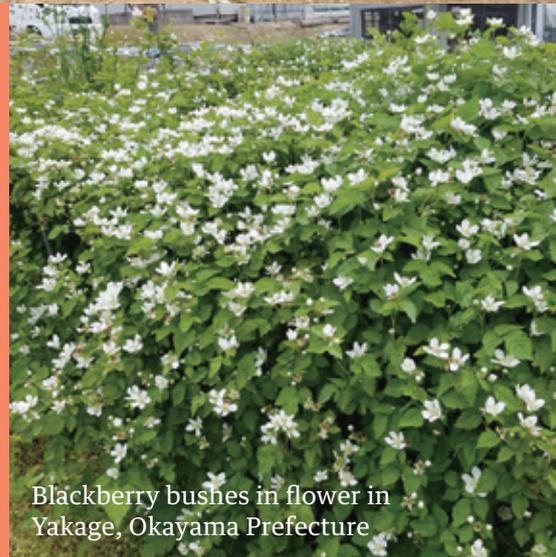


Dr. Ziaul Karim with a student alongside blackberry bushes in Yakage

Bangladeshi Couple Supports Town Revitalization through Agriculture

Dr. Ziaul Karim and his wife, Sonia Parvin, both from Bangladesh, moved to Yakage-cho, Okayama Prefecture in 2019. There, they have been working with local people on the cultivation of fruits that have not been widely grown in Yakage before and on creating new goods made by processing those fruits.

SATO KUMIKO



Blackberry bushes in flower in Yakage, Okayama Prefecture

Okayama Prefecture is blessed with many sunny days all year round, and is well suited to farming fruit such as peaches and grapes. In southwestern Okayama, Yakage-cho (hereinafter Yakage) is known for cultivating both its main crop of rice as well as fruit such as grapes, pears, persimmons, figs and strawberries. Recently, blackberries and papayas have also started to be more widely cultivated in the area.

“Yakage may well be called the land of papaya in a few years,” says Dr. Ziaul Karim from Bangladesh. Karim, who has a PhD in agriculture, has been working to take advantage of the sunny local climate to grow blackberries, papaya and other new varieties of fruit that haven’t been

grown in Yakage before. Lately, cultivation of these fruits has been going well.

When in Bangladesh, Karim had studied botany at university and researched sugarcane cultivation. At the request of the Bangladeshi government, he started research into stevia, a natural, low-calorie sweetener, as a way to address the rising number of people with diabetes in his country.

In 2003 Karim came to Japan to conduct further research, and earned a Ph.D. from the Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology. He returned to Bangladesh and then came back to Japan in 2012.

That autumn, Karim and his whole family were cheerfully welcomed by local people when they visited a Yakage festival. They decided to move to Yak-

age because they felt “that people were warm and that everyone treated our children like family.” Karim and his family moved to Yakage in 2019.

Sonia Parvin taught English in Yakage as a Local Vitalization Cooperator, a part of a municipal government program promoting cooperative initiatives within local communities (see *Highlighting Japan*, May 2019). Karim has served as a Local Vitalization Cooperator in agriculture since 2019, and has been involved in the farming of new fruits that could become new local specialties and in the development of goods made from those fruits.

Karim borrowed some farming land in the town and first began growing blackberries, a fruit that thrives on land that gets lots of sun. Karim is keenly inter-



A low-sugar dessert made using stevia and locally grown blackberries



Papaya grown in Yakage



Karim explains papaya cultivation to students on a field trip

ested in methods of outdoor plant cultivation without using chemical fertilizers. Next, he tried growing papayas. Unlike the blackberries, which were originally grown in North America, papaya is originally a tropical crop that does not ripen to a yellow color when it is grown outdoors in non-tropical places like Yakage.

In response to this, Sonia Parvin came up with the idea of picking the unripe papaya (green papaya) to use in cooking as a vegetable ingredient instead of eating it as fruit. She came up with curries and other recipes using the papaya; and when she provided them to local facilities, the unique flavor was very popular, leading to the start of joint projects with local farmers and food product manufacturers.

As a result of such initiatives, many new tasty and nutritious products were created in rapid succession, including non-sugar blackberry jam using stevia, blackberry leaf tea, papaya leaf tea, and noodles containing papaya.

“As the cooperation between local farmers and food manufacturers progresses and new products are produced from locally grown fruits and vegetables, more farmers will participate in the initiatives. When it comes to regional vitalization, nothing is more important than collaboration,” says Karim. More farmers have recently begun growing papaya under Karim’s guidance. As a result, patches of abandoned farmland across Yakage are being reborn as orchards.

Karim is concerned that young peo-

ple in Bangladesh have become less and less interested in agriculture in recent years. He strongly hopes that the eco-friendly agricultural practices developed in Yakage will spread across Japan, to Bangladesh and eventually around the world. 🇯🇵



Ziaul Karim, Sonia Parvin and family