

Wooden Straws from Thinned Wood



Wooden straws formed by rolling slices of wood using the *kannagake* technique

Wooden straws, an environment-friendly alternative to plastic straws



All photos: Courtesy of Aqura Home Co.

Inspired by traditional techniques called *kannagake*, a Japanese home builder has developed wooden straws with excellent functionality and safety performance by finely shaving thinned wood.

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THE “Osaka Blue Ocean Vision” announced at the G20 Osaka Summit in June 2019 is still fresh in our minds. The aim of the vision is to reduce additional pollution from marine plastic litter to zero by 2050. With plastic waste reduction now a global issue, some companies are discontinuing the use of plastic straws. Meanwhile, wooden straws developed in Japan are attracting a great deal of attention both at home and abroad.

In Japan, a variety of alternative products, such as straws made from paper and bamboo are arriving on the market. Among them, wooden straws have been developed by Tokyo-based home builder Aqura Home Co. by coiling thin slices of wood just 0.15 mm thick into a helical shape. Since going on sale in 2018, the wooden straws have won numerous accolades, including the Good Design Award. They were also used at the G20 Osaka Summit.

The wooden straws are the brainchild of environmental journalist Takeda Yuri and Nishiguchi Ayano of Aqura Home’s public relations department, borne of a shared concern about forest management. During her news-gathering activities, Takeda learned that the torrential rains that devastated western Japan in 2018 were partly caused by the decline in the water source cultivation functionⁱ of forests, and that the solution demanded management measures such as thinningⁱⁱ to increase the forest’s ability to store rainwater. Takeda approached Nishiguchi of Aqura Home with the suggestion that finding a groundbreaking use for thinned wood would accelerate thinning, and they came up with the idea of wooden straws.

However, Aqura Home is a home builder and producing everyday goods is a very different area of expertise. Mindful of this, Nishiguchi persuaded people in her company by highlighting the significant value of being involved in forest conservation activities as a manufacturer that works with timber, and it was decided to start the project.

Developing straws made from immature, soft thinned wood brought with it many problems. The solution was found in the age-old technique of *kannagake* for shaving wood into a smooth surface, a technique valued by the company since its establishment in 1981. Using a traditional Japanese hand plane called a *kanna*, thinned wood is finely shaved and rolled up, producing wooden straws with the grain of the wood showing through that are not only beautiful but also have excellent functionality and safety performance.



Kit for making wooden straws

“We cannot contribute to solving environmental issues by simply making products. We need to create awareness about wooden straws, so that by using them people produce a resource recycling model that is plowed back into the maintenance and management of forests,” says Nishiguchi.

This idea has led the company to make its manufacturing process available free of charge, working with numerous organizations to promote the use of wooden straws and raise awareness of resource recycling. Rolling up the sliced wood is a simple manual process that does not require the use of machinery, helping provide work for people with disabilities and reducing CO₂ emissions. Indeed, the “wooden straw” project is gradually expanding, with the City of Yokohama now participating in the manufacture and sale of the straws, and an associated company of East Japan Railway Company (JR East) manufacturing the straws and using them on the Shinkansen bullet train service.

Aqura Home sells not only finished straws but also kits for individuals to make their own wooden straws. Says Nishiguchi, “When it comes to tackling environmental issues, it is important to improve awareness among people one by one. I want as many people as possible to consider the environment when coming to know about wooden straws. Growing awareness in this way can be very powerful.”

It may just be a small thing, but the kits contain a wish that the user will feel the warmth of wood and think of the forests, the ocean and the earth. 🌱

i The function of forest soil to alleviate flooding by storing precipitation and equalizing the quantity of water flowing into rivers, and to stabilize river flows

ii Work to address dense forest growth by cutting down some trees and encouraging the growth of those that remain