

Shiso

Shiso (perilla, also called Japanese basil), is a perennial herb that belongs to the mint family. A variety of red shiso that thrives in the valleys of Ohara is a key ingredient in pickled vegetables (*tsukemono*).

Shiso is harvested from mid-July until early August. The leaves are stripped from the stems and mixed with water, salt, eggplant, and cucumbers before being left to soak in vats. Within days, the color from the shiso is absorbed into the vegetables, turning them a deep red distinctive of Ohara *tsukemono*.

For centuries, shiso has been used as a natural preservative by local people, as well as members of the court. According to local lore, residents delivered *tsukemono* to the Empress Dowager Taira no Tokuko (1155–1214) after she entered Jakko-in to become a nun in 1185. On receiving this gift, she expressed delight at the color of the pickles. Another legend asserts that Awano Naishi, the Empress Dowager's lady-in-waiting, was the first to create the distinctive red *tsukemono* when she used local shiso to preserve a gift of cucumbers and eggplants.

Some years ago, Ohara *tsukemono* became so popular that shiso growers in the valley were unable to meet the demand for it. Red shiso was imported from elsewhere in Japan, but did not produce the correct color. Local growers believe that the variety of shiso grown in Ohara is unique because the high mountains surrounding the village have prevented cross-pollination with other strains of the plant.