

Shimonita Area

Shimonita-Negi

One of Shimonita's best-known agricultural specialties is *Shimonita-negi*, a type of Japanese long onion only available fresh for a short time in the middle of winter. Like many of Shimonita's crops, the vegetable is well suited to the area's alkaline soil.

The *Shimonita-negi* is thicker and shorter than other long-onion varieties grown in Japan and is considered by many to be "the king" of long onions (*negi*). An Edo period (1603–1867) document states that *Shimonita-negi* were so delicious and prized by the local daimyo lord that one buyer was willing to pay any amount to have them delivered as soon as possible. It is also sweeter than most other varieties, especially when cooked. During winter, local inns and eateries often serve sukiyaki, a hotpot containing thinly sliced meat and vegetables, including *Shimonita-negi*.

Various products made with *Shimonita-negi*, ranging from *negi*-infused miso paste to *negi*-flavored rice crackers, are available at local shops.

Konnyaku

Shimonita is widely regarded as the *konnyaku* capital of Japan. *Konnyaku* is a gelatinous food processed from the bulbous root (corm) of *Amorphophallus konjac*, also known as devil's tongue. The plant was introduced to Japan from China centuries ago and, for most of history, was used only as a medicinal herb. It thrives in Shimonita's sandy, alkaline soil; once the method for processing the root into a food was discovered about 250 years ago, *konnyaku* became a major crop of the area.

Processing begins with slicing the root thinly and drying the slices, which are then ground into powder. The powder is reconstituted in water infused with calcium hydroxide (pickling lime), producing an indissoluble jelly-like substance. Natural coloring is often added, and then the *konnyaku* is boiled to set its shape.

A high crop volume is required to deliver the finished product. About 100 grams of root produces about 8.4 grams of powder. One hundred grams of powder will produce about 3.5 kilograms of *konnyaku*.

Konnyaku is most frequently sold as a firm block or as noodles. It is a popular ingredient in simmered dishes, where it picks up flavor from the broth in which it is cooked. It aids in digestion, detoxification, and is very low in calories, making it a popular diet food.

A recent development is *konnyaku* ice cream, available in cones at local tourist outlets. It is not quite as sweet as regular ice cream and does not melt as fast.

A 90-minute *konnyaku*-making experience is available at a local studio. (Weekends only, except New Year; book in Japanese via phone or email.)
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Mulberry Leaves

Raising silkworms was a major cottage industry in Gunma Prefecture, including in and around Shimonita, until the mid-twentieth century. Since silkworms feed on mulberry leaves, it was common for local farmers to grow mulberry bushes, which thrive in Shimonita's sandy soil. When silk production dropped after World War II, the farmers growing mulberry bushes were forced to find other uses for mulberry or change crops.

Mulberry leaves have several health-promoting properties. They are high in calcium, iron, potassium, magnesium, and polyphenol antioxidants. Mulberry leaf infusions have also been found to reduce blood sugar.

Kanbe Ryusuke, whose grandfather grew mulberries, understood the market potential of these health benefits. Today he maintains 25,000 organic mulberry bushes, from which he produces dried, powdered mulberry leaf. The product is designed to be easier for people to consume and can be enjoyed in various ways.

Mulberry leaf powder can be used much like matcha green tea powder to make tea or to flavor ice cream or other sweets. Unlike matcha, it is caffeine-free. It can also be used to flavor savory dishes, for example to replace spinach in green curries. For a completely Shimonita-sourced health food treat, try mulberry leaf bubble tea using local *konnyaku* beads in place of tapioca.