

Thatching Materials

The type of grass used to thatch the roofs of gassho-style houses in most of Shirakawa-go was traditionally a variety of miscanthus called kariyasu. The grass was grown on the hillsides of the Sho river valley, usually at high altitudes where sunlight was abundant and the soil suitable. Each family had its own field, which was tended to during the summer and harvested from late October to the end of November, before the snowy season. The harvest had to be completed before the first snowfall and was very labor-intensive: An experienced worker could reap 60 to 100 bundles of grass in a day, whereas some 10,000 bundles were needed to thatch an average roof. The harvested grass was initially dried and stored on the hillside in large cylindrical stacks called nyu. When a roof needed to be thatched, the nyu was disassembled. The bundles of dry grass were tied together and either pushed down the hill or, while there was still snow on the ground, slid into the valley like a giant sled “driven” by a villager.

Nowadays, miscanthus for thatching is cultivated only in fields reachable by car and dried down in the villages, where the dry grass is stored in sheds. The kariyasu grass itself has become a rarity, replaced by a faster-growing and more common miscanthus variety called susuki. Population decline from the 1970s onward has made maintaining the traditional grass fields difficult, and much of the susuki used in Shirakawa-go today is grown near Mt. Fuji in Shizuoka Prefecture. The switch from kariyasu, which has hollow stems, to susuki, whose stems are distinguished by thick fuzz on the inside, has increased the time it takes for a thatched roof to dry after rain or snow. Roofs thatched with susuki therefore decay relatively quickly and must be replaced every 20 to 30 years, while a kariyasu roof can last decades longer.