

Sericulture in Shirakawa-go

Sericulture, or silkworm raising, was practiced in Shirakawa-go since at least the eighteenth century and became a major local industry in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This was also when the area's characteristic gassho-style houses with their steeply slanted, triangular roofs began to be built in large numbers. In fact, these houses became popular mainly due to their suitability for sericulture. A typical gassho-style house has a spacious multi-level attic underneath its slanted roof. Windows on the gable ends let in sunlight and air, making the attic a well-lit and well-ventilated space, which is kept warm and dry by heat and smoke rising through the lattice ceiling from the house's irori fireplace. Together, these factors made the attics ideal for growing silkworms, which are sensitive to cold and moisture. The combination of gassho-style houses, the ability to grow the mulberries used as food for silkworms on nearby slopes, and a sufficient supply of labor made Shirakawa-go a leading regional producer of high-quality raw silk from the late Edo period (1603–1867) until the first few decades of the twentieth century.