

Sugarcane

It is hard to miss the sprawling fields of sugarcane (*satokibi*) that cover the agricultural fields of northern Amami Oshima—the jointed stalks and palmlike leaves are often seen bordering both sides of local roads. The cane grows up to 4 meters or more before being harvested in the winter months. Cultivation of *satokibi* on Amami Oshima is said to have started over 500 years ago, but it became the island's main crop in the mid-eighteenth century. The Amami Islands were ideal for growing the cane, and sugar was in high demand on mainland Japan. The Satsuma domain saw sugar production as a way to bolster their finances, and ordered that harvested sugarcane be turned over by the islanders as a kind of tax. In return, the islanders received rice and other necessities. This led the islanders to give up rice cultivation and turn their fields to sugarcane. Today, Kagoshima Prefecture produces almost 40 percent of Japan's sugarcane.

The Process

The brown sugar made from sugarcane has many nutrients, including minerals and vitamins, that are retained in the simple refining process. The first step is crushing and squeezing the stalks to get the juice, which has a sugar content of 23 percent at the peak harvesting period in February and March. This juice is filtered, then boiled for several hours until it condenses into a thick syrup, which is placed on flat surfaces to dry. The resulting blocks of brown sugar have a variety of uses. People in Amami Oshima eat small bits with tea, and use the powder in cooking. Some of the sugar is sold as a sweet souvenir of the island, while most is sent to the mainland as raw sugar for further processing. Visitors can watch brown sugar being made at a number of locations on the island. Those interested should contact the tourist center for more information.

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