

## **Hachiryū Melons**

The Hachiryū district of Mitane has long been famous for its sweet and delicious melons, which account for 70 percent of the agricultural produce in the area. A particularly prized variety is the Thank You Melon, which is cultivated only in Hachiryū and is in season from June to July. Another popular type is the Takami Melon, known for a particular sweetness that leaves a tingling taste on the tongue.

Melon production has fallen sharply in Hachiryū since its peak in the late 1980s. This decline is due in part to the aging of the farming population, as fewer and fewer younger people are willing to learn the difficult techniques required to pollinate, grow, and harvest these high-end fruits. As with many fruits produced in Japan, appearance is paramount, and the melons must be round, large, and blemish-free to command good prices.

Hachiryū melons, along with a vast array of other fruits and vegetables, are sold at a local farmers' market called the Dragon Fresh Center. Around 100 area farms are registered with the center, which is run under the auspices of the local JA Group (Japan Agricultural Cooperatives) organization. All produce is labeled with the name of the farmer who grew it, and often wives work at the market managing sales while their husbands work the fields.

A large and fierce-looking statue of a dragon wrapped around a pole makes the Dragon Fresh Center easy to spot from the road. The market is open seven days a week, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., except between the months of November and February, when it closes at 5 p.m.