

Tamba Urushi Harvesting

Urushi (lacquer) harvesting techniques in the Tamba region have a history stretching back at least 1,300 years. People in the region paid taxes with urushi in ancient times, and earthenware with traces of lacquer has been recovered from a burial site dating to the seventh or eighth century. Urushi harvesting techniques have been passed down through countless generations, but this precious knowledge is in danger of dying out as a result of changes in technology and the global economy.

Urushi is extracted by scoring the bark of lacquer trees and quickly scraping out the sap before it hardens. At the beginning of the season, urushi harvesters plan their cuts along the trunk, leaving two uncut vertical sections that run the length of the bark to allow water and nutrients to flow. Harvesters make singular cuts every four days directly above or below the previous cuts, creating a series of parallel scores in the bark. The properties of the finished urushi vary depending on whether it was collected at the beginning, middle, or end of this process.

Tamba Urushi is recognized for its exceptional quality. Harvesting techniques are very precise, and were developed to extract the maximum amount of urushi—approximately 200 milliliters—from each tree before it is eventually felled. The harvesters then propagate new trees with root cuttings.

As part of recent conservation efforts, the Yakuno Woodware and Lacquerware Facility (*Yakuno Ki to Urushi no Yakata*) and a Tamba Urushi nonprofit organization were established to preserve this important cultural heritage. Occasionally, experienced urushi harvesters take groups to the forest to teach the harvesting techniques for future generations.