

Tamba Urushi Harvesting

Urushi (lacquer) is a natural substance derived from the sap of lacquer trees. It has been collected in the Tamba region for at least 1,300 years, and in ancient times Tamba paid its taxes in urushi. By the Meiji era (1868–1912), there were more than 500 urushi harvesters in the region. However, the introduction of synthetic coatings and cheap urushi imports in the postwar period reduced the competitiveness of domestically produced urushi. Furthermore, environmental factors including climate change, destruction by natural predators, and the loss of forest biodiversity have created even more challenges for local harvesters.

Tamba Urushi is renowned for its high quality, and its long history is due to the great care taken by a small number of people passing on the harvesting techniques to successive generations. The labor-intensive collection process begins with tree cultivation. Once trees are at least 10 years old, sap is harvested gradually throughout the season, from June through October. Only about 200 milliliters of sap can be collected from each tree. Afterward, the trees are felled to collect the last drops of precious sap, and new trees are propagated through root cuttings.

Urushi harvesting was designated an Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Kyoto Prefecture in 1991. The Yakuno Woodware and Lacquerware Facility (Yakuno Ki to Urushi no Yakata) in Fukuchiyama is like a miniature museum, displaying specialized tools and information on the harvesting process. It includes a small gift shop and gallery, and holds lacquerware workshops by appointment.