

Growing and Harvesting Green Tea in Ureshino

The tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*) belongs to the evergreen Theaceae family and grows leaves year-round. The process of producing tea leaves suitable for brewing is therefore also spread over the entire year.

From Summer to Winter

The first stage begins in August with a period of maintenance to ensure good harvests the following year. The soil's condition is checked and restored to a state suitable for tea cultivation. Fertilizer is added to help the soil absorb necessary nutrients, and areas impacted by the previous harvest are ploughed to loosen and aerate the soil. Work is also undertaken to reduce the impact of insects and diseases, so that new leaves for new tea will flourish during the coming year.

In September, the leaves are monitored and pruned to prevent them from being damaged. Further "autumn pruning" takes place once temperatures drop to encourage new leaves to sprout once temperatures drop to between 18 and 19°C in October. The timing of this pruning is crucial to ensuring the highest quality of tea.

As temperatures drop further in November, work is carried out to protect the roots from the winter cold. A common method is to cover the soil and roots with rice straw collected from the recent harvest in nearby paddy fields. The rice straw also helps suppress weeds and retain water in the soil.

Winter is also an opportunity for the grower to contemplate the long-term prospects for each tea plant. Tea is usually first harvested from a plant four years after the seedling starts to grow. A stable yield is typically achieved between the seventh and tenth years. As the plants grow taller each year, they are trimmed at the trunk every five years around 30 to 50 centimeters above the ground to promote sprouting. Plants over 35 years old are replaced.

Preparing for Ichibancha

“Spring pruning” begins in February in preparation for the first harvest of tea (*ichibancha*). This helps ensure that old tea leaves are not mixed with fresh leaves at harvest time. As temperatures begin to rise again in March, the plants start to sprout new leaves. The timing depends on the location, and the task of the farmer is to monitor the fields to check for sprouting leaves. Small fans are placed around the fields to circulate air so as to prevent frost damage when the air temperature drops. Seedlings are planted in fields dedicated to growing new plants.

Toward the end of April, the machines used to process the tea leaves are inspected ahead of the first harvest. Leaves start to open, with the timing varying from farm to farm. A black net is placed over the tea plants 10 days prior to harvesting. This allows farmers to adjust the amount of sunlight, darkening the green color of the tea as well as enhancing its flavor. Fertilizer is added once more to the soil.

First, Second, and Third Harvest

The first harvest in Ureshino is traditionally scheduled to peak in early May. Once picked, the tea leaves must be processed immediately, since their quality will quickly deteriorate. The harvesting and processing cycle repeats every few hours to ensure the leaves remain fresh. Tea farms in Ureshino are located at varying altitudes, so timing is crucial to producing high-quality tea while minimizing waste. If a plant at this stage is found to be unhealthy, it may be uprooted.

The second harvest is typically scheduled for mid-June to early July. As with the first harvest, the plants are covered with a black net to adjust the amount of sunlight. The timing for picking the leaves is also carefully monitored. The leaves picked in this harvest are used to produce black as well as green tea. Tall plants are pruned around this time to minimize the risk of damage from pests.

The third and final harvest of the year takes place from late July to mid-August. Once it is completed, the tea season in Ureshino is declared over, and the cycle begins again for the following year’s harvests.