

Japanese vegetables

The role of vegetables in the Japanese diet

Whilst it is difficult to generalize about national cuisines, it is safe to assert that the Japanese diet has a tilt towards, fresh and unprocessed seafood, vegetables, and fermented foods.

The latter are extensive and include shoyu (soy sauce), miso (fermenting normally soybeans with salt and koji mold), tsukemono (picklers), natto (whole soybeans fermented with bacillus subtilis variation natto), umeboshi (dried and fermented Japanese plums), katsuobushi (simmered, smoked, and fermented skipjack tuna).

Here, we examine Japanese vegetables. Sea vegetables, such as seaweed, are covered separately (June 21, 2023, blogpost). Vegetables are a source of necessary nutrients, and dietary fiber. The latter is important for digestion, and by giving a sense of a full stomach, reduces the urge to eat repeatedly.

A tremendous diversity of vegetables

Japan's mountainous and elongated topography (spanning latitudes 24 degrees to 55 degrees) lead to a diversity of micro-climates. In turn, these support a wide variety of vegetables.

Fig.1 presents some classic Japanese vegetables by season. Fig.2 is a more comprehensive list, with both the Japanese and English names where applicable. Fig.3 and Fig.4 show the vegetable selection at a local supermarket. It takes four photographs to cover the principal shelves.

Fig.1 Classic Japanese vegetables by season	
Spring	takenoke, fuki, nanohana, haru-kyabetsu, naganegi
Summer	kyuuri, tomato, nasu, toumorokoshi, edamame, myogo, shiso, gouyaa
Autumn	satoima, satsumaimo, nagaimo, kabocha, matsutake
winter	Komatsuna, negi, daikon, gobou, renkon
Note: <i>Japanese Superfoods, Learn the Secrets of Healthy Eating and Longevity – the Japan Way!</i> by Yumi Komatsudaira, 2022	
Source: Japanese Superfoods ⁽¹⁾ – see note above, Conceptasia, August 2023	

Seasonal vegetables tend to have common characteristics.

Spring vegetables are often slightly bitter reflecting their slow growth over the winter months. Some summer vegetables have a high-water content which helps when eaten to cool the body. To provide energy, Autumn vegetables tend to have a higher protein and carbohydrate content. Finally, winter vegetables are often sweet reflecting the storage of sugar to protect against the cold. ⁽¹⁾

Japan has maintained its seasonal ingredient traditions from *Shojin Ryori* vegetarian cuisine to home cooking (bento boxes), to *kaiseki* fine dining.

Fig.2 Japanese Vegetables, A Broad Overview			
Japanese name	English name	Japanese name	English name
Spring vegetables		Autumn and Winter vegetables	
nanohana	rape blossom/canola flower	daikon	radish
naganegi	Spring onion, shallot	hakusan	cabbage
takenoko	bamboo shoot	shiitake	mushroom
fuki	giant butterbur	shimeji	mushroom
haru-kyabetsu	Spring cabbage	shungiku	edible chrysanthemum
seri	Japanese parsley	shouga	ginger
me-kyabetsu	Brussels sprouts	chingensai	Bok choy
asuparagasu	asparagus	negi	green onion
Shin-jagaimo	new potatoes	gobou	great burdock
kinusaya	snow pea	satoimo	taro
ingen	green bean	satsumaimo	sweet paper
soramame	broad/fava bean	nagaimo	Chinese yam
kabu	turnip	Matsutake	mushroom
serori	celery	kabocha	Japanese pumpkin
burokkori	broccoli	renkon	lotus root
karifurawa	cauliflower	komatsuna	mustard spinach
nira	chive/nira	Other vegetables	
kureson	watercress	piiman	bell pepper, green pepper
Summer vegetables		okura	okra
kyuuri	cucumber	shiso	mint family
tomato	tomato	bajiru	basil
nasu	eggplant	tamanegi	onion
toumorokoshi	corn	aojiso	green perilla
edamame	green soybeans	hourensou	spinach
myouga	Japanese ginger	ninjin	carrot
shiso	perilla		
gouya	bitter melon		
Note: Vegetables included in fig.1 are highlighted in grey			
Source: Conceptasia, August 2023			

Vegetables and Health

A diet rich in vegetables and fruits can lower blood pressure, reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke, prevent some types of cancer, lower risk of eye and digestive problems, and have a positive effect upon blood sugar, which can help keep appetite in check. ⁽²⁾

When consuming vegetables, it is best to avoid using a blender. A blender breaks down fibers to such a degree that the digestive system benefits, and the sense of a full stomach, is lost.

References:

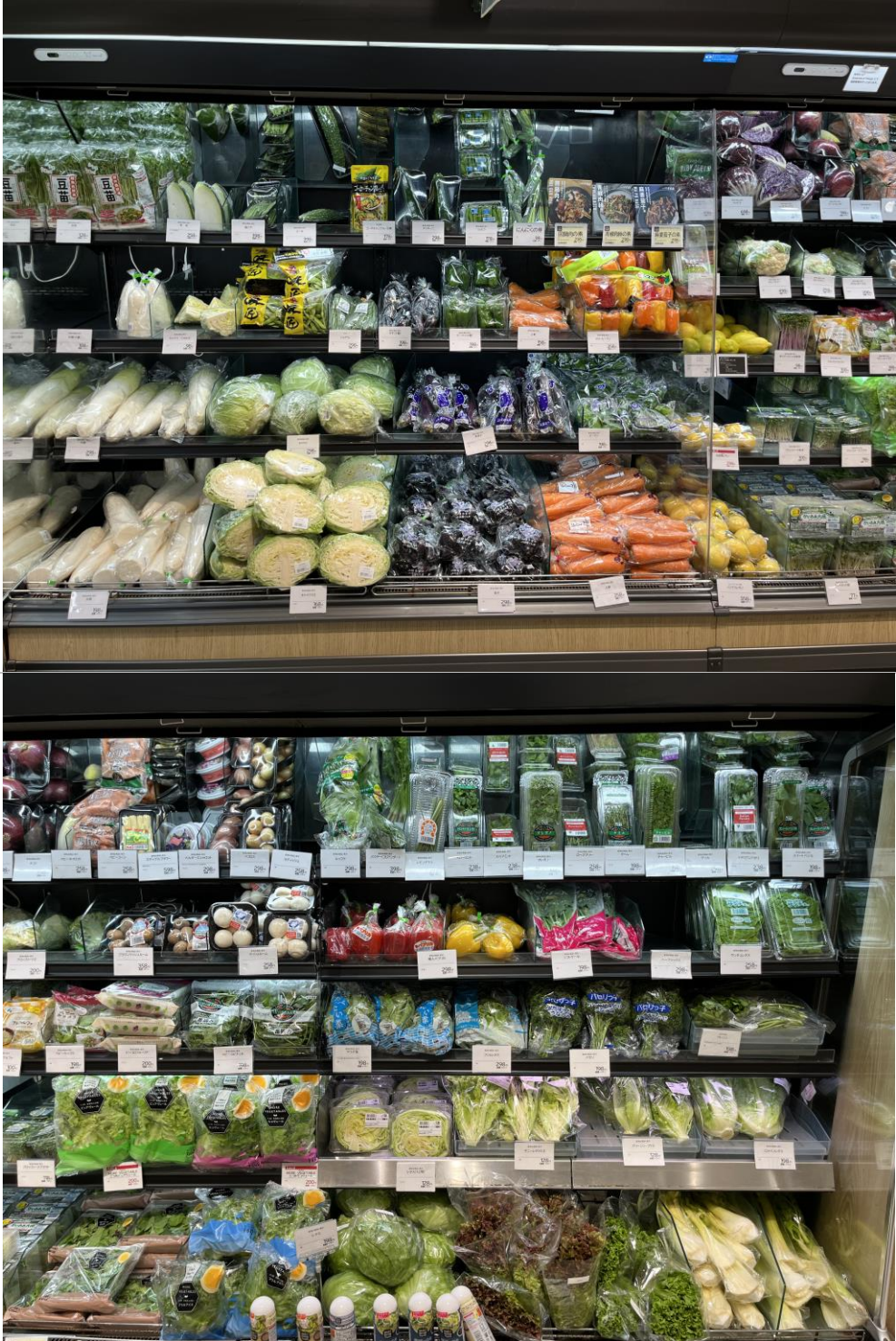
- 1) *Japanese Superfoods, Learn the Secrets of Healthy Eating and Longevity – the Japan Way!* by Yumi Komatsudaira, 2022
- 2) *Harvard T.H. Chan, school of Public Health:*
<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/what-should-you-eat/vegetables-and-fruits/>

Fig.3 A supermarket's vegetable selection, mid-July



Source: Conceptasia, August 2023

Fig.4 A supermarket's vegetable selection, mid-July - continued



Source: Conceptasia, August 2023