

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto

Photo by Masayoshi Masuda



Seasonal Kyoto Vegetable in Anrakuji Temple

In Japan, a lot of people consider Japanese pumpkin (e.g., butternut squash) to be an autumn and winter food, because Halloween was introduced to Japan and pumpkin products are available in autumn. Also, to prevent catching a cold in winter, it is customary to eat pumpkin on winter solstice (around December 22nd).

However, pumpkin is generally harvested between summer and autumn. It keeps well and contains a wealth of carotene and other nutrients. In ancient times, people used to eat pumpkin in winter because it was difficult to find enough food during the season.

Here in Kyoto, this type of pumpkin (*Shishigatani Kabocha* squash) as in this photo is harvested during summer. At Anrakuji Temple in Shishigatani area, located in the east of Kyoto, a Squash Memorial Service (*Kabocha Kuyo*) is held on July 25th. After praying in front of *Shishigatani Kabocha* squashes offering at the Buddhist altar, complimentary cooked squashes are served to 1,000 visitors at least. This temple only opens during this festival and public open days in spring and autumn.

The Origin of *Kabocha Kuyo*

This festival dates back to the Edo period, about 200 years ago. The chief priest of the temple had a dream that you should eat a *Shishigatani Kabocha* squash to prevent contracting diseases. Therefore, he started offering it at the Buddhist altar during the summer harvest, and holding the memorial service to eat it on July 25th. In fact, although it contains about 1/8 carotene of the common Japanese pumpkin, it contains about 6 times the amount of linolenic acid, which lowers cholesterol.

Why are Kyoto's Traditional Vegetables Very Famous in Japan?

Kyoto's traditional vegetables including this *Shishigatani Kabocha* squash are well-known for their high quality. This city, flourishing as a culture center, was geographically a long way from the sea. It was difficult for them to get seafood in ancient times. Therefore, these vegetables have been improved and produced by local people along with the development of vegetarian dishes and tea-ceremony dishes in many temples and shrines. In addition, their improved vegetables are suitable for soil and water, and also naturally thrive in Kyoto's climate.

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