



Far left: Composed in a salad of Ishigaki herbs and edible flowers are hibiscus, fennel, *hirezansho* (a relative of Sichuan pepper), pipatsu pepper, *chomeiso* ("long-life plant," a member of the carrot family), and *hamamachi* Ryukyuan mugwort. Left: A collection of Ishigaki spices includes coriander, marjoram, pipatsu, turmeric and pipatsu, *hirezansho*, savory, shell ginger, and galangal.



Yoko Takenishi

An herb specialist and grower on Ishigaki Island, Takenishi heads the Yaeyama chapter of the Japan Herb Society and directs the Ishigaki Island Herb School. Born on the island of Yonaguni in 1954, she is a leading evangelist for Okinawan herbs. www.herb-ishigaki.com

some gold-banded lilies, her very favorite flower. After several more meetings, they decided to tie the knot.

"The last time I went to Yonaguni with my husband, about six months before he died, we came across a large clump of Easter lilies in bud down by the beach in Hikawa. I'm not a religious person, but it feels almost mystical to me to have had an encounter with lilies at both the beginning and the end like that. It's as if they were his final gift to me," she muses.

Flowers figure strongly in her interests. "I have this image that food should be bright and pleasurable," she says. One of her favorite ways to achieve that is with edible flowers, which add beauty as well as flavor. She cites hibiscus blossoms: "Some people object to using hibiscus in herb teas and such because in Okinawa it's often planted at graves. But we've been using it for generations, and, in any case, it helps food do what it's meant to do, which is to appeal to all five senses."

Encouraging the use of edible flowers is one way Takenishi would like to spark some new traditions for Okinawan herbs. To her, herbs' primary value is in improving food. Medicinal uses are secondary. No matter what the health benefits, she rejects foods that look and taste like medicine. "You take pleasure in good food," she says, "and in due course it makes you healthy and strong. That's how it should be."

Okinawa has long been famous for the longevity of its residents, but that is less true today. In the past, life expectancies for both men and women were higher in Okinawa than in any of the other 46 Japanese prefectures. In 2013, however, women fell to a still-respectable 3rd place, while men plummeted to a dismal 30th. This has been attributed to a rise in obesity as a result of changes in diet.

Takenishi points out, "Okinawa has more daylight hours than anywhere else in Japan. We have thriving green foliage year-round. When plants spend less time at rest, it makes a difference in what they store up.

I'm no scholar, but it seems clear to me that when plants get more sunshine, they grow more vigorously and the goodness becomes more concentrated. Herbs grown in Okinawa have a stronger fragrance; they're more pungent. Take lemongrass—nothing you find on the main islands can even come close. When I go to conferences, people from other parts of the country say to me, 'Okinawan herbs are really a breed apart, aren't they? They smell so much stronger.' I think the historical longevity of people here had something to do with eating plants that got more sun. I'd like to see us return to being the prefecture with the highest life expectancy. You are what you eat. Food is our most precious thing. I want to help enrich it in any way I can."

When Takenishi lets her thoughts wander, she often finds herself remembering the landscapes of Yonaguni. It has long been a dream to return to the island of her birth someday.

"I look back now to the days when we were forced to be self-sufficient, the whole family pitching in, somehow managing to eat even though we didn't have any money, and I actually find myself thinking those were the good times. In the season for school outings, I would hike all over the countryside on my two skinny little legs. If I climbed up the side of a hill, I could look out over the village and its terraced rice paddies. At the shore Yonaguni had the clearest, bluest waters you could ever hope to find. You saw right through the blue to the sand at the bottom. It was like living in a picture someone had painted—a fairy-tale world. Of course, it wasn't until I was much older that I realized this. At the time, that was just the way it was. But it's still there, and therefore it's possible to get it back. Though in a somewhat evolved form, it's still possible to reclaim something close to those tranquil days when we thrived on herbs and wild plants. My goal for the future is to help preserve not only the culture and history of the islands but the native herbs, too, to make sure they will get passed down to future generations."