

The story of a man who became obsessed with bananas ~JATCO alumnus  
Suzuki's second challenge~



It was 6:30am on a Saturday morning. I received a message in my DM on the Instagram account I run, @jatco\_community, that said, "I'm a former JATCO employee." It was none other than my senior from my previous department, Suzuki Makoto-san!

As we exchanged updates on each other, one of them said, "Today, I'm going to plant bananas at the kindergarten. Do you want to come and see them?" I've decided to go.

Two hours after receiving the call, I met Mkoto-san for the first time in 10 years at a kindergarten in Fuji City. (Since I affectionately called him "Makoto-san" while he was still working there, I will continue to call him that in this article.)



Makoto-san is obsessed with bananas

After retiring, Makoto-san spent his days enjoying his hobbies, including windsurfing. However, he says he has become concerned about the declining birthrate and lack of vitality in his hometown, Motoyoshiwara. At that time, he heard about a relative, Suzuki Takamasa, who grows bananas outdoors. At first I thought, "Wait, you can grow bananas outdoors in Japan?" Although surprised, Makoto-san thought it sounded interesting and headed straight to Takamasa's farm. In just the first year, the plant produced 166 bananas!

From there, Makoto-san joined Masataksan. I got hooked on banana cultivation. When I asked him why he was so fascinated by it, he replied:



Working hard together with the volunteer members

"When I was at JATCO, I worked towards delivery deadlines in the Production Control Department (now the SCM Department). That experience is still useful in today's cultivation. We have to harvest before winter comes, so we work backwards and plan our operations. But since you're dealing with nature, things don't always go as planned. It's much harder than manufacturing a transmission. That's why it's interesting."

Some people around them were skeptical, saying, "It's impossible to grow bananas," but the two did not give up. They continued to encourage others and, together with their friends, increased the number of seedlings. Three years later, the single plant I originally purchased online has grown to over 100 plants, and now I have around 200. There were long queues of people hoping to get a share of the plant.

The circle of these activities is expanding, reaching as far east as the Kanagawa Nishi-Sho region, west as Shizuoka city, and north as the Obuchi area. Last year, a community group called the "Motoyoshiwara Open-Air Banana Village Association" was formed, with Makoto-san serving as its chairman and Takamasa-san appointed as a professor. There are over 60 members. The group is made up of a diverse group of people, mainly retired people, including fruit farmers and former engineers, and continues to operate as a non-profit volunteer organization to spread "banana culture" in Fuji City.



At the root of this activity are social perspectives such as contributing to the SDGs, global warming, and educating children on aesthetic values, and it has also led to a new challenge: expanding domestic demand for tropical plants.

"Through bananas, connections between people expand from a 'point' to a 'line' and then to a 'surface. That is the greatest joy."

His eyes were truly full of life as he spoke.

### **Expanding the circle of bananas -- to the local area and to the future**

Otake-san is another member of the Banana Club that I met in the kindergarten's garden.

She told me:

"When I saw the chairman's post on social media, I was surprised: 'Bananas on Mt. Fuji?!' I thought it would be fun, and then we had a mutual acquaintance...and before I knew it, I was a member of the "Banana Club."

She now voluntarily takes on a public relations role, recording the appeal of the activities through photographs and writing. The first "Banana Shareholders' Meeting" was held in March, providing an opportunity to share the history of bananas and their cultivation schedules.

"The connections that SNS has made are happening here again."



Ms. Otake observes over the work

The members of the "Banana Club" do more than just plant seedlings. They have

also started an initiative to plant bananas at local kindergartens and elementary schools and grow them together with the children. They have also started delivering bananas to places where people gather, such as elderly care facilities and temples.

Makoto-san also contacts agricultural high school teachers and universities to gather information on banana diseases and soil quality, and to share cultivation methods. In Japan, 98% of bananas are imported. With few experts in the field, he says he is sometimes approached with questions.

This sincere attitude is something he continues to have during his active career. "We make plans and execute them to meet deadlines. Now he is facing new challenges while facing nature and connecting with people. Now, he seems to shine much more like himself."

The members of the Motoyoshiwara Outdoor Banana Village Association are cultivating the Blue Java variety (commonly known as the ice cream banana), which can withstand temperatures down to -5 degrees Celsius, and the Dwarf Namwa.

It seems that this "Outdoor Banana" can only be grown in Fuji City, where the climate is warm and stable throughout the year.

The name "Bell Banana" was inspired by Suzuki's name, which means "bell." It has a light and elegant taste, and they expect to harvest 2,000 stalks between November and December. I can't wait.

## Expanding circle of bananas in the open field



Small encounters that start on social media invigorate the local community and connect to the future.

In my time running @jatco\_community, I have never felt so up close the joy of people connecting with each other.

We would like to continue to cherish and nurture these warm connections.