In olden days, hemp was grown all over Japan. Between the Edo period and the early Showa period, it was grown as a commercial crop in Tochigi, Nagano, Hiroshima and other prefectures. Fibers obtained from the stem were used to make the core cord for geta (Japanese wooden sandals) straps, as well as nets for fishing and other purposes. Further, in northeastern and central Japan, regions that are climatically unsuited for cotton cultivation, hemp was grown until at least before the start of World War II for self-consumption, such as processing the fibers to make clothing. Hemp also played an indispensable role in religious rituals. String made from hemp was used to cut a newborn baby’s umbilical cord and was also included as an auspicious item in gifts exchanged at traditional Japanese engagement ceremonies. Oil extracted from hemp seeds was utilized for edible purposes.

We assume that hemp was cultivated for two purposes—the extraction of fibers and the harvest of seeds. Looking at examples of cultivation in different regions, it is clear that the two purposes must be considered separately. Hemp that is cultivated for extraction of fibers must be planted closely to prevent branching and must be harvested before the plants begin flowering. Cold climatic conditions and infertile soil further enhances the quality of the fibers. On the other hand, hemp that is grown for the extraction of seeds thrives on fertile soil and is planted at distances that stimulate branching.

In order to extract fibers from hemp, it is necessary to first remove the bark from the stems of the plants. In many regions this was done by boiling or steaming the stems in large pots. However, the bark can be removed through simpler means such as by immersing in water or covering with weeds to raise its temperature, and hemp can be processed without the use of special tools. These methods are employed even today in Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures. To further enhance the quality of fibers, they must be scraped off using bamboo, wood, metal, etc., to eliminate impurities on the surface. In Tochigi Prefecture, tools made by splitting bamboo rods were traditionally used, while chopstick-like tools made from bamboo were used in Hiroshima and Miyazaki prefectures. Most of these tools were crafted by the local people themselves utilizing materials obtained from nearby mountain forests. In addition, no special tools were required for the harvesting of seeds as well.

Looking at examples of cultivation in different regions, we can assume that if hemp was grown in the Jomon Period, it would have been possible to process and utilize it.

Key words: Hemp plant, Hemp being cultivated for the extraction of fibers and for the harvest of seeds, processing of hemp, commercial crop and subsistence crop, handmade tools