

Repurposing Valuable Real Estate in the Sky

Rooftops of commercial buildings in Tokyo are reborn as urban oases.

by Kelly Wetherille

Tokyo is one of the world's great urban jungles, and you never know what you are going to find when walking around the city. Not only might there be hidden shrines or pockets of green space around corners and down alleyways, but there are also plenty of hidden treasures above us. While it may seem like an endless sea of concrete and glass, many of the rooftops in the city are beginning to tell a different story.

Over a decade ago a project was launched to make use of the rooftops of commercial buildings in Ginza, one of the most fashionable shopping districts in Tokyo, in a way that would benefit both the environment and the community. A community-based project called the Ginza Honey Bee Project, or Ginpachi, is taking formerly underutilized rooftop space in the heart of the city and turning it into homes for honeybees. The project began with the idea to produce something in the district that is mainly known for consumerism. About 1,000 visitors from all over the world visit the Ginza beehives to learn about beekeeping each year.

In 2017, the project yielded a total of 1.6 tonnes of honey, and in 2018 it produced a further 1.4 tonnes. Ginpachi honey can only be purchased in Ginza, where it is proudly sold as a local product. Other businesses in the area have also used the honey to make unique, original goods, such as French toast with honey, a honey ale, and honey highball.

Bees are incredible creatures because even though their flight patterns cover a large area, not much space is needed for a single hive. Many of the rooftops used in the Ginpachi project are not particularly spacious, and yet they can accommodate tens of thousands of bees. In addition, honeybees normally need to cover an area with a radius of

about four kilometers in order to find enough nectar to produce honey. But Ginza's location provides the bees with access to the diverse plants on the grounds of the Imperial Palace, Hibiya Park, and Hama-rikyu Gardens, all within a two-kilometer radius. Even the linden trees on Namiki Street in Ginza produce nectar that is gathered by the bees. In fact, there are more honey sources (flower nectar) that are safe for bees in central Tokyo than in rural areas. The reason is that pesticides are not often used for street trees in central areas, and honeybees are vulnerable to pesticides.

Aside from bee raising and honey production, some other Tokyo rooftops offer a lush oasis for people of all ages to temporarily escape from the chaos of the city. Many department stores in Japan turn their rooftops into beer gardens during the summer months, but the Seibu Ikebukuro Main Store in one of Tokyo's busiest districts has gone a step further, transforming its rooftop into a beautiful urban garden. The Cuisine and Green Aerial Garden has 10 food carts serving a variety of food and beverages throughout the year, in addition to the beer terrace that welcomes guests between late April and late September.

The rooftop garden is now a delightful, family-friendly place, and after its remodel the number of visitors has increased by almost eight times. The most impressive feature is the pond and water garden inspired by Claude Monet's famous gardens and ponds in Giverny, France, immortalized in his masterpiece series of Water Lilies.



One of the tens of thousands of busy workers at the Ginza Honey Bee Project, where they make honey on a rooftop in the fashionable shopping district.

Gazing at the lush greenery and the aquatic flowers, it is easy to forget that you are actually standing on a rooftop in one of the largest cities in the world.

With new buildings constantly popping up and old ones being renovated all over Tokyo, it seems only logical that we will be seeing more and more rooftops being transformed into pleasing spaces of contemplation, relaxation, and entertainment, giving both residents and visitors to the city more places to feel at one with nature. So next time you are out walking through the streets, do not forget to look up—you never know what you might find.



On the roof of the Seibu Ikebukuro Main Store, you can contemplate scenery that might make you forget that this is one of the busiest areas of Tokyo.