

**West Coast Wasabi**  
By **Melissa A. Trainer**

15 October 1997

This article originally appeared in the Wall Street Journal  
(Copyright (c) 1997, Dow Jones & Company, Inc.)

Puyallup, Wash. -- "We went through a lot of effort to finally find out and accept what fresh wasabi wants. After 10 years, we've now got the project to the point where it will work," said Thomas Lumpkin, chairman of the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences at Washington State University in Pullman, as he guided me through his woodland nursery of more than 20 varieties of fresh wasabi, each one carefully chosen and carted back from Japan.

Called *Wasabia japonica* in Latin, wasabi is a perennial plant that is a staple in Japanese cooking. A member of the Cruciferae, or mustard family, and valued for its fiery qualities, the Japanese horseradish is most well-known for its use in sushi and sashimi (raw fish preparations) and noodle dishes.

Until Mr. Lumpkin and his former graduate students Catherine Chadwick and Steve Potts sank their teeth into the project, fresh wasabi was rarely available and never before grown successfully in the U.S. The powdered and paste wasabis that are sold at Asian markets here in the States and used in sushi bars throughout the country are a far cry from the real McCoy. Possibly made with a dab of authentic wasabi but most likely consisting of European horseradish, hot mustard, additives and artificial coloring, the processed wasabis lack the nuances and complexity of the fresh. Although the artificial powdered and paste products are hot, they tend to be grainy and lack the perennial plant's characteristic sweetness and herbaceousness.

For the pioneering American professor, the mission started during the Vietnam War. While stationed in Japan, Mr. Lumpkin was introduced to fresh wasabi and developed an appreciation for it. Twenty years later, as an agronomist, he started studying wasabi and considered the benefits of trying to cultivate it here in the U.S. His intentions for doing so were threefold. First, he wanted to expose Americans to the authentic Japanese ingredient. Second, because wasabi fetches such a high price - - the most coveted part of the plant, the knobby green rhizome, sells for about \$5 a piece and up to \$85 a pound -- the professor knew it could be a lucrative alternative crop for some small American farmers. And, finally, as Japanese agricultural production decreases and wasabi beds are polluted by the runoff from rice fields, Mr. Lumpkin felt that an American-grown crop could help make up any deficit.

With his goals clearly defined, Mr. Lumpkin appealed to Impact, an acronym for the International Marketing Program for Agricultural Commodities and Trade, for help. This Washington State University program, which works in conjunction with the U.S. Agriculture Department and the Washington State Department of Agriculture, enabled Mr. Lumpkin to conduct in-depth field research in Japan.

Wasabi doesn't grow in all parts of that country. It's picky about the place it calls home, and if simply plopped in a patch of dirt and exposed to full sun, the plant will surely wither. But if placed in a spring with cool running water, a bed of gravel and deciduous trees overhead, the plant will flourish and even reproduce. According to Mr. Lumpkin, "With wasabi, the whole thing is like real estate. It's all about location, location, location." For that reason, the plant is cultivated in those Japanese regions offering just the right accommodations -- the Izu Peninsula, Shizuoka, Shimame, Okutama and Nagano.

Relying on Japanese colleagues for introductions, Mr. Lumpkin ventured into remote mountain villages and forests where the country's wise and somewhat guarded old growers have been tending their treasured wasabi beds for many years. "To ask for a sample would have affected the moment and the feelings," Mr. Lumpkin said. Instead, he listened to the farmers, shared their hospitality (usually something involving wasabi) and quietly gleaned information from them. The professor would then wait to be offered a plant sample, buy some plants at a roadside wasabi stand or acquire them through Japanese business acquaintances. Over the course of 18 months, Mr. Lumpkin gathered hundreds of plants to bring home to his nursery here.

Luckily for Mr. Lumpkin, Ms. Chadwick and Mr. Potts, the maritime Pacific Northwest is the perfect region in which to pursue the project's long-term goals. They stalked the region in search of farms and sites that had the appropriate growing conditions; Ms. Chadwick, who had lived on a wasabi seedling farm in Japan while earning her degree, drove down an infinite number of regional dirt roads until she found just the right small streamside farm. She also consulted with Roy Carver, a real-estate developer who became intrigued with wasabi and started T-Bar Ranch, a high-tech wasabi farm in Florence, Ore., to help meet demand in Japan.

Still, numerous kinks had to be ironed out before the Japanese plant would flourish. Streamside beds were built, redesigned and rebuilt. Local pests, such as slugs, aphids and deer, had to be managed without pesticides and chemicals. And new plant material had to be continually retrieved from Japan. Eventually, however, the wasabi sleuths cracked the mystery of growing wasabi on American soil and achieved Mr. Lumpkin's original goals.

The wasabi grown under Ms. Chadwick's guidance is sold periodically at select specialty markets on the West Coast. Though supply is extremely limited, it is expected to increase over the next few years as new techniques are implemented and more Northwest farmers take the plunge. To order call the International Trade and Marketing Group at (408) 626-3901 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. PDT; orders are being taken now for the next harvest, which will be in January.