

Blossoming day lily industry a tourism and financial wonder



Cash crop intended to eradicate rural poverty in Shanxi becoming a firm favorite with visitors

By YUAN SHENGGAO

In mid-May, thousands of tourists flocked to a day lily farm in Tangjiapu village in Yunzhou district of Datong city, Shanxi province, when the flowers were in full bloom.

Their pictures shared on WeChat helped make the site a must-see attraction in the city in the north of the province.

However, local farmers said they didn't intend to make the farm a tourist destination.

Instead, they had aimed to make the farm a production base for organic day lily, a cash crop with steady profitability.

The herb, which is also called yellow flower, golden needle vegetable, or worry-free grass in China, is a popular food ingredient nationally.

The large farm is now a major source of revenue for local villagers, offering hundreds of jobs.

Yang Qi, a farmworker who was weeding the fields, said: "I am paid 150 yuan (\$21) a day at the farm and I earned more than 10,000 yuan last year."

He added that the farm is a poverty-alleviation project launched by the local government.

"We are happy that we can find jobs near our homes," Yang said.

Zhang Shunbao, Party secretary of the village, was the first to develop a day lily farm.

He began to run a 20-hectare day lily farm in 2013 and said he had seen a steady increase in income in the following years.

This steady profitability inspired other farmers follow his lead and the herb has grown into a major industry in the village.

"The market demand keeps growing and the prices are steady. Farmers' enthusiasm in growing the herb is further enhanced with various preferential policies from the government," Zhang said.

Growing day lily is also a major means of poverty reduction in the neighboring New Fangcheng village.

The village was established in 2016 for people relocated from less-inhabitable areas.



Clockwise from top: The fertile land in Datong, which features volcanic soil, is suitable for the growth of day lily. WANG ZHONGXUN / FOR CHINA DAILY Farmers in Tangjiapu village in Yunzhou district of Datong collect day lily flowers in the early morning. CHEN XUDONG / FOR CHINA DAILY Farmworkers weed at a day lily farm in Yunzhou district. WANG ZHONGXUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

The collective 36 hectares of day lily farms, together with plantations of other grains and cash crops, are a major source of revenue for local people.

The village's 77 impoverished households were declared poverty-free at the end of last year, according to local officials.

The family of Bai Lijun is among them. Bai said his parents grow day lily in the village and he works as a welder in his neighborhood.

"We earned about 70,000 yuan last year from these jobs," Bai said.

According to An Yiping, an official responsible for the day lily industry in Yunzhou district, it was only in recent years that day lily expanded into a major industry that boosted local rural economies and helped with poverty alleviation.

"Although day lily in Yunzhou district has been known for its quality historically, we have to solve a number of problems to make it an industry of scale," An said.

The official cited a dry climate, shortage of labor in harvest season and insufficient processing facilities as major difficulties.

Pang Youjun, chief of the agricul-

ture and rural affairs bureau in Yunzhou district, explained how local officials and researchers helped the sector grow into a larger industry by solving these problems.

"With an average annual precipitation of less than 400 millimeters, the shortage of water is the biggest problem for developing large-scale day lily plantations," Pang said.

He said local researchers developed a water-saving drip irrigation system to replace traditional ways of irrigation.

He added they have also developed the use of organic fertilizers, and the monitoring and prevention of plant diseases.

He noted that the government has released a series of preferential policies to boost the sector's growth. These include a subsidy of 15,000 yuan for each hectare of day lily crop; projects for improving the water supply, electricity and road facilities; and incentives in financing, insurance and technical instruction services.

In addition, the government of Yunzhou allocated a fund worth 400 million yuan to support the development of the day lily industry.

According to the official, the planting area of the herb reached more than 10,000 hectares in Yunzhou. There are 109 villages, 95 plantation cooperatives and 15 processing enterprises engaged in the growing and production of day lily products. The revenue from the industry reached 700 million yuan last year.

Zhang Jun, an official at Yunzhou district poverty reduction office, said the day lily farms, as well as the sunflower and rape farms, can be attractive destinations for tourists during their blossoming seasons.

Boosted by the agricultural sight-seeing sector, Yunzhou district welcomed 1.97 million visits last year, netting 1.9 billion yuan in tourism revenue, according to Zhang.

In Datong as a whole, the city government also plans to develop the day lily industry into a major pillar for boosting the rural economy.

According to the city government's development plan for the industry over 2019-23, the total growing area of day lily is expected to reach 20,000 hectares by 2023.

Li Yali contributed to this story.



Day lily, also called golden needle vegetable or worry-free grass, is a popular food ingredient in China. WANG ZHONGXUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Children's symbol of love for their mothers and a delicious herb

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Day lily, a popular food ingredient in China, is a native herb with a long history and rich cultural connotations.

Li Xueru, a food culture researcher in Shanxi province, said the *Book of Songs*, or *Shijing*, a collection of poems compiled by Confucius more than 2,500 years ago, mentioned this herb by calling it worry-free grass.

"Legends have it that when a son is about to leave his mother for a long journey, he would usually plant the herb in the courtyard, hoping to relieve the mother's worries about him when seeing its beautiful blossoms," Li said.

He added that as the herb is a symbol of children's love to their mothers, it frequently features in poems and paintings.

Zhu Peiquan, a painter in Datong, said the reason why the herb was usually seen in paintings is related to a tradition starting from the Jin Dynasty (265-420).

"About 1,700 years ago, women liked to wear ornaments made of day lily flowers because they believed the herb would give them more opportunities to conceive children," Zhu said.

Day lily is also popular in gardening.

Since the 1930s, Western horticulturists have cultivated thousands of varieties based on the original species in China and neighboring countries.

"However, the herb is mostly known to modern Chinese people as a food ingredient," said Li, the food culture researcher.

He said there are some scientific

Datong has a history of more than 600 years in growing day lily. It is now the largest producer of the herb in Shanxi province."

An Yiping, an official responsible for the day lily industry in Yunzhou district, Datong city in Shanxi province

reasons why this herb is called worry-free grass.

"For more than 2,000 years, people have used the herb's flower as a food ingredient," Li said.

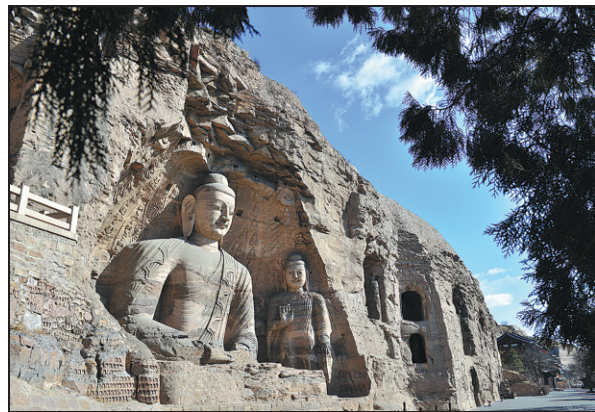
"However, according to an encyclopedia compiled 1,700 years ago, the flower is slightly toxic, rendering the eaters some exhilarating illusions," Li said.

The researcher noted that the toxin is removed in the drying process, so it is recommended to use dried instead of fresh flowers as a food ingredient.

According to An Yiping, an official responsible for the day lily industry in Yunzhou district, Datong city in Shanxi province, the day lily in Datong has fewer toxins compared to varieties in other regions after hundreds of years of cultivation.

"Datong has a history of more than 600 years in growing day lily. It is now the largest producer of the herb in Shanxi province," An said.

Li Yali contributed to this story.



From left: The sitting Buddha in the 20th cave is a landmark statue at Yungang Grottoes. WANG ZHONGXUN / FOR CHINA DAILY The statues of Buddha in the sixth cave are surrounded by many delicately carved images and patterns. LI JIN / FOR CHINA DAILY The Seven-Buddha statues in the second cave still retain their original colors. WANG ZHONGXUN / FOR CHINA DAILY



Cultural landmark underwent years of conservation work that cost millions

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Yungang Grottoes in Datong, which is rated by tourists as the No 1 attraction in Shanxi province, is the cultural asset most cherished by local officials and workers in heritage protection.

Located at the southern foot of Wuzhou Mountain, some 16 kilometers west of Datong's city center, Yungang Grottoes was carved out of the mountain and extend about 1 km from east to west.

Comprising 252 caves and 51,000 statues within an area of 18,000 square meters, Yungang Grottoes represent an outstanding achievement of Buddhist cave art in China

during the 5th and 6th centuries.

A classical masterpiece of Chinese Buddhist art, Yungang Grottoes played an important role among early Oriental Buddhist grottoes with a far-reaching effect on Buddhist cave art in China and East Asia.

Yungang Grottoes was added to the World Cultural Heritage List in December 2001.

The growing recognition of the value of this historical site among people at home and abroad is a result of painstaking efforts made by local heritage protection workers and officials over a period spanning nearly a century.

In 1931, a protective committee

for the grottoes was founded, marking the beginning of systematic protection of the site.

In 1952, three years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the city of Datong established the protection bureau for the grottoes. Then in the 1960s, the protection of the site became a State-level program recognized by the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

Despite growing awareness in heritage protection, local cultural workers have faced a number of new challenges in the modern times.

After more than 1,500 years, many caves, statues and carvings were on the edge of ruin.

To solve the problem, local cultural

protection workers collaborated with experts from throughout China for a restoration project from 1974-76. Most of the cave structures and statues were reinforced and stabilized.

In the 1990s, protection workers discovered water leaking from the ceilings and particle deposits caused by coal transported on the nearby road as two other major threats to the caves.

The local authorities in protection cooperated with the Getty Conservation Institute, an organization for worldwide heritage conservation based in Los Angeles, the United States, to design solutions to these problems.

Their collaboration included

environmental monitoring to assess the extent and effect of rock weathering due to pollution, wind, rain and extreme temperature changes. It also produced a comprehensive conservation plan to prevent further deterioration caused by visitors and the environment.

The water leakage problem, for instance, was solved by applying geotextile to the ceilings.

An assessment in 2007 showed that more than 90 percent of the water leak was prevented and no more leaks were found in the following year.

Also, under the suggestion of the GCI, Datong invested 260 million yuan (\$36.6 million) to build a new

road 1,500 meters away from the grottoes for transporting coal, to replace the one that was only 300 m away.

After the completion of major restoration and maintenance projects, Yungang Grottoes is now in a better position to welcome more visitors.

According to Cui Xiaoxia, deputy president of the Yungang Grottoes Research Institute, the number of visits has increased on average 10 percent annually in recent years.

"We are making more people understand the brilliant Chinese culture through their visits to Yungang," Cui said.

Li Yali contributed to this story.