

Sporty Tractors



Yanmar's YT5 series tractor
Photo: COURTESY OF YANMAR

Brightly colored tractors with the appeal of sports cars are transforming the agricultural landscape in Japan.

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UNTIL recently, the qualities that were sought after in agricultural machinery were horsepower, performance, functionality, safety, resistance to breakdown, and efficiency. Yanmar Co., an agricultural machinery manufacturer headquartered in Osaka, has taken on the challenge of providing new value in terms of design, in addition to satisfying these traditional requirements. Yanmar has achieved innovation through designs which had never crossed anyone's mind before in the realm of agriculture.

In 2012, Yanmar celebrated its 100th



Industrial designer Ken Okuyama
Photo: COURTESY OF KEN OKUYAMA DESIGN

anniversary. During much discussion about the next 100 years, the key words "design" and "branding" came to the fore. Yanmar set up a project to give shape to these concepts, and asked graphic designer Kashiwa Sato and industrial designer Kiyoyuki Okuyama for their cooperation. The project focused on designs for the branding of every single Yanmar product not to mention tractors and combine harvesters, which are Yanmar's core products.

In 2013, Yanmar launched a new concept tractor, the YTO1-Y-CONCEPT YTO1 ADVANCED TRACTOR, as part of its Premium Brand Project.

The company responsible for the design was KEN OKUYAMA DESIGN. CEO Okuyama Kiyoyuki is famous overseas as Ken Okuyama, who has been involved in the design of Porsche and Ferrari cars. The sports-car like design combined with excellent functionality and performance caused quite a stir.

Naoki Sakata from Yanmar's Public Relations Group explains, "Mr. Okuyama was born into a farming family and has an interest in or rather an attachment to farming. He was, therefore, able to produce not just designs for tractors and combine harvesters but comprehensive designs which considered the user and took comfort and ease of



The cockpit of a YT5 series tractor
Photo: COURTESY OF YANMAR



A Yanmar tractor leads a parade of 100 Ferraris along Osaka's Midosuji Dori.
Photo: COURTESY OF YANMAR

operation into account.”

In fact, Okuyama went to farms and drove and operated tractors himself many times to develop his ideas before making the designs.

When it came to giving shape to the vision of this concept tractor and mass producing the tractor as the YT Series, the technical expertise that Yanmar has built over up over a century was fully demonstrated.

Sakata says, “Usually, when we commercialize a concept model, the design changes from its concept. However, the development team was determined to produce a finished product which was as faithful as possible to the concept from a design intended for mass production. Those involved on the manufacturing side worked on development feeling a sense of unity.” Mr. Okuyama’s design together with the milestone of Yanmar’s 100th anniversary energized the team.

With the tractors creating a buzz and gaining popularity, the Yanmar YT3 Series of mid-size tractors, which are suited to farming in Japan where fields are small, was awarded the Good Design Gold Award 2016. This is the size which is also suited to hobby farms overseas, and Yanmar has already started selling the YT3 Series in North America.

Farming in Japan faces major problems, not least population aging and a shortage of farmers.

Sakata says, “Yanmar has been involved in Japan’s agricultural industry for 100 years through the supply of agricultural machinery. Looking ahead to the next 100 years, Yanmar would like to reshape farming, change the image of farming, and make

farming more sustainable. Our tractor designs are a part of our efforts.”

Yanmar’s employees are also told by elderly farmers that their sons have taken over their farms from them, saying they’d like to have a go at farming because it’s cool. The designs are having a huge impact on the problems facing farming.

Sakata says, “The impact of the Tokyo Motor Show was also huge, but in 2015 there was a parade of 100 Ferraris along Midosuji Dori, Osaka’s main street, and a Yanmar tractor led the parade, making a big impression.”

Through such events, Yanmar may have prompted people and children who have no direct connection with tractors to give some thought to farming. Sakata says, “Amid all the announcements, the excitement and buzz we are creating in bringing design to the forefront, it is important to anticipate the next 100 years.”

Prior to focusing on design, Yanmar had continuously conducted research and development based on ergonomics on aspects such as the positioning of the tractor control panel and the driver’s seat, and had achieved fine craftsmanship.

The advent of the YT series, combining outstanding performance and excellent design, has now also given Yanmar an identity. Moving forward, Yanmar plans to focus on enhancing its corporate value through the integration of design features in other products besides tractors to further clarify its identity. This may be one answer to the problems facing Japan’s farming industry. 📌