

Hybrid coconuts could help farmers

Manu Aiyappa | TNN

Bangalore: Towering coconut trees that dance to the sound of the wind along the Bangalore-Mysore road, are an integral part of the lives of residents of Old Mysore. But over the past decade, they've brought farmers more pain than gain.

Farmers are plagued by the rising number of senile and diseased coconut palms, besides the scarcity of climbers to pluck coconuts, that have squeezed productivity.

Says Made Gowda, 75, a coconut farmer near Ramanagara: "I've been a coconut farmer for more than 25 years. The income is very low, and farming requires patience as the tree takes long to mature. Moreover, it's become a formidable task managing pests and diseases that have taken a heavy toll on the trees of late." In such a season, a new hybrid coconut species developed by Bangalore-based Deejay group offers hope for farmers like Gowda.

Inspired by the late Prof Antony Davis, the pioneer in coconut breeding from the US, David Lobo, Deejay group founder, decided to try his luck with coconut breeding in 1984, on 80 hectares near Madurai in Tamil Nadu. It took six years to develop the first hybrid seedling.

Today, they've successfully developed three varieties of coconut seedlings that offer thrice the economic yield of regular trees. Lobo said the species have special qualities, like early fruition and high yield, and are also shorter. The trees, when dedicated to the production of tender coconuts, yield nearly 30% more nuts than regular coconut trees. He said more than 2 million hybrid seedlings are being produced at Madurai and Ambur in Tamil Nadu, Bailur on the West coast in Karnataka and Sanguem in Goa, with a waiting period of over a year.

Deejay group CEO M Murali said the hybrids were developed with seed material collected from superior quality coconut palms from the Andamans, Tiptur (Karnataka), Nagercoil and the West coast, with characteristics that further improved productivity to benefit coconut farmers.

Tender offer on a sultry summer day

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bangalore: At Sai Traders, a shack along Outer Ring Road, M Venkatesh gives tender coconuts for free to pregnant women and the physically challenged. He is the yalneer man, whose reputation has grown in the area. A nutful of sweetness is welcome in the summer heat, especially when a yalneer is selling at Rs 30 each.

Venkatesh, 51, has set up a board at the shack, off Iblur gate: 'Free for temples, pregnant women, physically challenged', attracting dozens of passersby. This offer has also built many bonds.

Venkatesh, from Hosur, started his trade four years ago. When his business ran into loss a year ago, he told himself to share his profits with the needy to streamline his business, and also for his own peace. "Those who go to a temple name the god when they buy it. If they still cheat me, it's up to them. Till now, none has lied to me. A pregnant woman, who was my customer, called me up recently to say she had a boy and I must visit her," says Venkatesh.

But is this largesse leading to losses? "No, in fact, I'm getting bulk orders these days. There are cases when I'm woken up

Chethan Shivakumar



BENEVOLENT ACT: At the shack of M Venkatesh, tender coconuts are free for pregnant women and the physically challenged

in the middle of the night to give tender coconuts for emergency cases. I'm getting more customers," says Venkatesh.

Anand Reddy, a techie picks up tender coconuts from Venkatesh, had uploaded his picture with the board on Facebook. "An American who replied to the post even said he wanted to meet me when he comes down to Bangalore," says Venkatesh.