

Conserving the nearly extinct navara red rice organically

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Guiding force: Mr. Narayanan Unni says sourcing pure seeds was difficult. —Photo: M.J. Prabu

The Navara Eco farm is nestled on the banks of the quietly flowing Shokanashini river in Chittur, Palghat district, Kerala. The unique aspect of the farm is that it has the largest navara rice growing field (12 acres) in the State. "Navara is a medicinal rice variety and its cultivation is almost extinct. Many reasons such as non-availability of pure seeds, low yield and high production cost are attributed for this. The speciality is that this is the only organically grown navara rice farm in the region," says Mr. P. Narayanan Unni, a third generation marketing executive-turned-farmer, running the everyday activities of the farm.

Unlike other rice varieties, which are white in colour, navara is deep red and has been cultivated in the Palghat region for more than 2,000 years but in the last 40- 50 years it has come close to being completely wiped out due to several new hybrid varieties being introduced.

Focus

After taking over the farm's management about 15 years ago, Mr. Unni decided to turn his attention to conserving native rice varieties in the region. He figured out that many of the traditional varieties are fast becoming extinct. "I desired to work on conserving this specific rice because, apart from being a traditional variety, it is well known among the local farmers. After years of strenuous effort I was able to collect and segregate enough seeds and gradually moved into cultivating solely navara rice in my 12 acre farm," he says.

Concept

During this time, he turned to organic farming in a serious manner and gradually evolved the concept of Navara Eco Farm. "The journey was not easy," says Mr. Unni and adds "conserving the variety proved an almost impossible task because sourcing pure seeds seemed uphill. In some places the variety was already contaminated by other hybrid varieties. In addition the low yield (200 kgs from an acre) made the cultivation commercially unviable. Added to this were problems faced during conversion to organic farming. According to him, conversion to organic farming in navara rice was not very remunerative but his interest pulled him on. Pest control proved a major challenge. "Tulsi and marigold were planted on the field bunds to repel the winged menace. Once pests damaged our four acres. For the next cropping season we trained our workers to catch the pests using nylon nets."

Being a traditional variety it was grown organically but because of its poor yield and difficulties in controlling pests and diseases conventional method of farming was adopted by some interested farmers to conserve it. Many moved away to growing other hybrid rice varieties. The crop is sown for seeds directly

in the main field during April and harvested in June. Once the **seeds are collected and cleaned it is again sown in December and harvested in February (60 days crop)**

Selling price

Approximately from an acre 200 -250 kgs are harvested. The variety is presently being sold for Rs. 400 a kg through personal contacts. But why organic? Can we not grow this crop using fertilizers? "Since it is a medicinal rice variety for consumption we decided to adopt only organic methods. We did not want the chemical residues in the harvested grains," explains Mr. Unni. Over the years the farm has been able to educate the labourers on effective farming methods specifically tailored for this type of rice farming. Today the workers guide other growers on the best practices being followed at the farm, according to Mr. Unni.

Several awards

The several awards and recognitions conferred by State, central governments and other leading agriculture institutions seem to prove the importance of his work. Recently the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights Authority conferred the second annual Plant Genome Saviour community recognition award on him. "The farm has also formed rice clusters for navara and got it registered under Geographical Indication through farmer led initiatives. The entire farm is certified organic from 2006," says Mr. Unni. Many scientists, students, authorities of various government departments and agencies are visiting the farm to learn about this variety and its cultivation details.

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