



## Pepper – a safe companion in coconut gardens

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“Pepper prices touches 40 lakh per ton”, the news hungry media flashed the hike in pepper prices all over India and some went to the extent to write “Pepper price jumps while rubber dips”, giving a dig once most coveted crop of the day.

Pepper had its best boom in the late forties and early fifties during the post world war period. According to elder farmers in the hilly tracks of Kerala, they suddenly became cash-rich and started to buy lands. The hilly hamlets started to get plenty of cars and automobiles and they also built modern terraced buildings.

Stories on the movement of promising bridegrooms from urban centres to the hilly “pepper-rich families in search of brides” is still narrated by the elders with its unending charm. Some pepper farmers in the hilly terrains took the opportunities to send their children to the then greater centres of learning like Trivandrum, Ernakulam and even

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to Chennai for higher education. Even now, these stories are described by grandmas with a lot of glitter to the younger generation.

It also helped for a large scale spread of pepper culture in the homesteads in mid and coastal tracts of Kerala, since pepper is grown as a companion crop of several perennial trees like coconut, Mango, jack etc. Without any additional space, farmers could generate a handsome income. Pepper thus became a very popular homestead crop all over the state. Pepper from time immemorial is given privilege to adore as a divine herb giving home-made medicines. It is added to several veg and non-veg preparations for providing rich aroma and enhancing digestive capacity. It is added to jaggery and coffee to prepare a sweet decoction to prevent the throat-aches, cough and cold. Though it was difficult for them to explain curative action, still it is popularly used in all homes in most of the rural areas. Dry pepper is preserved even now in every home of Kerala as a home medicine to guard against fever and digestive disorders.

Another very interesting fact was the emergence of new marketing system in rural areas during December – January, the peak harvesting period of pepper. Small group of traders visit homes to bargain for collecting pepper, since the homestead farming was the domain of women. After visting the pepper crop, they offer a price and settle the harvesting right. These groups will not only do the plucking, but also pay the price on the spot, without spoiling the vine, so that the next year also they will get the same contract. The spot payment, coupled with vine-care, these groups were doing a service for the rural people and they too were earning well. The biggest difficulty experienced by the farmers now is the total eclipse of this group and no substitute system has replaced. During the period, the encouragement given by the research and development agencies for growing pepper as a crop got wide acceptance as the companion crop for coconut. It was very widely accepted also, but now the lack of labour for climbing the trees has virtually spoiled the system. Solutions must be found for facing the situations like harvesting of pepper, spot procurement and the difficulties for marketing. Otherwise the process of movement of produce to the primary, secondary and tertiary market will suffer, upsetting the market reputation already created.

While growing on fruit trees, with good foliage, shade-loving varieties should be encouraged. While basins are made for coconut trees, pepper roots



must not be injured. Basins for manuring coconut must be made six feet away from the trunk of the palm. These tips if followed, will help the homestead cultivation of pepper.

The trade circles are pointing out that domestic consumption is going up. The huge demand observed during the farm fairs for quality pepper is the sight to be seen. The domestic promotion in a consumer-friendly manner could even face fall in export prices of pepper. The trade, but fears, once the new opening up of trade policies are put into effect, other pepper producing countries may use India as a potential market, bringing bad luck to domestic traders and farmers through price-cut competition.

Pepper magic in home therapy is gaining more popularity and it is transferred from generations to generations like devotional songs. Growing of pepper in flats are becoming popular. It is a pretty sight to observe that they are using pepper not only in dried forms, some even prepare pickles also. The use of pepper is gaining more and more acceptance and if more research is done on its medicinal qualities, its popularity will attain new heights. The present problems are so painful, as the old saying, "Njaval tree is full of fruits, but the crow is suffering from beak-ache". The pepper vines are ready to produce more thrills, yet framers are facing several obstacles which must get quick relief. The practice of limiting the heights of pepper vine, enabling the family to harvest must be encouraged. "Better late than never". Remember: Pepper prices cross rupees Four lakh per ton. It is the time for action.

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