

## In North Bengal banana is a paying intercrop in areca gardens

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West Bengal has an area of 3100 hectares under areca cultivation. Of this, about 75 per cent lie in the North Bengal districts namely Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and some parts of Darjeeling. Banana, betelvine and pineapple are the important intercrops grown in the areca gardens. In the recent years, banana has gained more popularity next to betelvine for its lower cost of cultivation and profitable market. Moreover, the crop does not involve any expenditure on plant protection measures. Therefore, banana as an intercrop plays an important role in raising the economy of areca growers.

### Variety

Among the popular varieties, 'Malbhog' occupies the top market position for its delicious taste and comparatively better keeping quality. 'Champa' occupies next in market position to 'Malbhog'. Other than these two quality varieties, 'Madna', 'Kachkala' etc. are cultivated to a lesser extent. 'Kachkala' has good local demand as a vegetable. Of late, other varieties like 'Martman', 'Singapuri', 'Jahaji' etc. are also introduced.

### Seed material

Usually vigorous suckers, with stout base and possessing sword leaves are considered to be suitable for planting. Population of suckers is maintained at 660 to 980 numbers per hectare depending upon

soil fertility and variety selected for planting.

### Season of planting

Planting is undertaken preferably in May-June taking advantage of the prevailing showers of the season for quick establishment of the suckers. Planting is also done throughout the year except in dry or heavy rainfall months.

### Preparation of land

Prior to planting, the plot of the bearing areca garden is brought to a fine tilth by careful spading. In newly established gardens, planting is done directly after or prior to planting of areca seedlings, without giving extra tillage for it. According to the size of suckers, usually pits of 45 cm cube are dug and allowed to weather for a few days. The dug out soil is mixed with one or two baskets of cattle manure or compost and the soil mixture is used for filling the pits at the time of planting.

### After planting

Suckers planted in May-June get established in 15 to 20 days and start producing new leaves vigorously as they are benefitted by the intermittent showers of the season. Weeding is done about three times during the rainy season. Desuckering is carried out periodically until the mother plant flowers

and thereafter leaving only one sucker to occupy the place of the mother. Propping of plants with bamboo or wooden poles is given to the inflorescence on fruit bearing plants wherever necessary. Regular cleaning around the base and removing of dry sheaths and leaves are done in order to keep the plants free from infestation of pests.

### **Irrigation**

During dry season (mid February to April) lift irrigation is given depending upon the availability of this facility. Pot-watering though given by some farmers is not a common practice.

### **Manuring**

Usually three to five tonnes of cattle manure or compost is applied according to the number of suckers planted in the areca gardens at planting time. A basal application of 0.5 kg. super phosphate followed by 0.22 kg. urea and 0.25 kg. muriate of potash each is made in two equal doses. The first dose is applied about three weeks after planting and the second one after four to five months. The fertilizer is applied around the plant after cleaning the base and loosening the soil.

### **Harvesting**

Flowering begins 8 to 9 months after planting and fruits take 3 more months to mature. The bunch is harvested when fruits have reached full size and show distinct colour of maturity.

### **Marketing**

Fruits are sold either in ripe or unripe condition. However, selling in green condition is preferred to ripe condition on account of its suitability for long distance transport and late sale. Prices vary greatly depending upon the quality and variety of the fruits. Usually 'Malbhog' fetches about Rs. 5.00 to Rs. 15.00 per bunch and 'Champa' Rs 3 00 to Rs. 10 00 per bunch. Price is higher in summer season than in winter. The fruits are collected by the businessmen from the cultivators at market places and transported to consuming and business centres.

### **Crop rotation**

Usually ratooning is discontinued when a general decline in yield of both crops is observed. Thus, an areca garden is kept free from intercrops usually for three to four years before another fresh crop of banana is brought in. A three or four year rotation is generally considered to be an ideal gap in order to recoup the lost soil fertility through the process of manuring either artificial or farm yard manures.

### **Economics**

Banana cultivation in the areca garden involves an expenditure of about Rs. 2300.00 per hectare and gives a net return of about Rs 850.00 per hectare in the first year. In the subsequent year the net return rises up to about Rs. 1600.00 per hectare and the total expenditure comes down as the cultivation involves only expenditure on routine operation.