

Coconut on a comeback trail in the State

Rejuvenation packages and a slew of other measures

R. Ramabhadran Pillai

KOCHI: Coconut is on a comeback trail after having gone through a perilous journey in recent years. A slew of measures being adopted by the Coconut Development Board are expected to revive the sagging fortunes of the crop.

A rejuvenation package announced by the board envisages removal of old and senile palms and replanting the farms with high-yielding varieties. The board is offering aid for the replanting operations in selected districts and is planning to extend the scheme to more areas.

Over the years, the tough conditions in the agriculture sector, in general, and the coconut farming segment, in particular, had turned away many of the farmers from the crop.

Today, the primary task of the board is to restore the confidence of the farmer in the crop. Board chairman T.K. Jose is confident that it can be done with coordinated efforts of the government, farm agencies, and the people.

He said novel schemes had been devised to help solve the problems at the grassroots level.

Behind in processing

"Though India occupies a comfortable position in production and productivity of coconut, when compared to other major coconut producing countries, we lag far behind in processing and exports. In a small country like Sri Lanka where production and productivity are less than that of Tamil Nadu, the export of value-added products is many fold higher than that of India, except in the case of activated carbon. India has to go a long way in strengthening the processing sector," Mr. Jose said.

• Package helps to remove old palms

• To attract youth to the job of palm-climbing

One of the serious issues faced by the farmers in Kerala is the scarcity of climbers who can harvest the crop from the top of the tall palms. It is a job conventionally done by skilled men who belonged to a particular community. The crunch is the fallout of the reluctance of the younger generation of the community to continue the age-old occupation.

Novel scheme

The board has come up with a novel scheme to attract youth in the art of palm-climbing. A project titled 'Friends of Coconut Trees' has been launched by the board, which envisages training with a stipend and guaranteed income.

Safe contrivances, innovatively designed by experts, are used for the operation. The scheme has received good response, with even women having had enrolled for the challenging task. The board has listed the names and mobile phone numbers of the trained candidates on its website so that their services could be made readily available.

Tender coconut water, which had been a favourite drink of people of all ages, is also on a return journey to the marketplace. Packaged tender coconut water is in high demand in several western countries.

The natural drink is considered an ideal energy booster which has been administered by experts for sportspersons. The board is encouraging entrepreneurs

to sell the product in packaged form.

Quite a few firms have already made a mark in selling the product.

The board has launched a new project to sell the natural drink at specially designed, attractive kiosks across the country. About 5,000 outlets are to be opened at the national level, with focus on tourism circuits. "We have to encourage and motivate farmers to make use of the knowledge technology and the latest research for improving the status of the crop and to enter into processing and value addition to capture the opportunities of the domestic and global markets," said the board chairman.

Past experience

In fact, raising coconut saplings in the farm or in the courtyard had been a rewarding experience in Kerala a few decades ago when the farm-based economy had a substantial share from the tall palms that dotted every nook and corner of Kerala.

The crop started losing its sheen after Keralites started migrating in large numbers to the oil-rich Middle East countries. A growing middle class endowed with strong purchasing power, coupled with a weakened labour base had begun to gnaw the roots of coconut farming in the Eighties and Nineties. The arrival of rubber around the same period as the saviour of the farmer resulted in further decline in farms where coconut had occupied a premier position.

Pest attacks that defied effective solution, added to the farmers' misery, leaving them high and dry. The fresh initiatives in the sector are expected to take the coconut sector to the good old days of glory in the farming and business sectors.