

Agarwood, the Wonder Crop

Source: deccanherald.com

Published: July 26, 2010

Agarwood, a high value commercial crop native to India, enjoys a good demand in both national and international markets. Planters in Malnad have taken to agar cultivation in a big way, writes Chethana Dinesh



M L Murthy always planted silver oak as an intercrop in his coffee estate in Chikmagalur. The leaves of silver oak, not particularly beneficial to soil, also harmed his orange crop. He was looking for an alternative to silver oak. Fortunately for him, his fellow planter told him about agarwood, forcing him to research the net for more information on the crop. He now swears by agarwood.

However, Murthy is not alone. Hundreds of other planters in the Western Ghat region have taken up agar cultivation in a big way. And, they have every reason to do so.

Agarwood, a high value commercial crop that is native to India, enjoys a good demand in both national and international markets. Known better as agar or oodh (as in agarbathi), it is easy to grow, maintenance-free and non-labour-intensive. Most of all, it is being perceived as a very good alternative to silver oak, promising good revenue in just about eight years.

Where silver oaks once stood

“I planted about 200 agarwood saplings in my estate last year in places where silver trees once stood. This year, I have planted about 300 saplings. If these saplings grow well and fetch us a good income, there is no doubt that planters will see better days. Since secondary crops like orange suffer due to the chemical content in silver leaves, my plan is to phase out silver and plant agar with coffee and orange plants as agar is a natural, wild crop that does not damage orange trees,” says Murthy.

Reintroduced recently in the Western Ghat region, agarwood’s origin can be traced to the trees of Aquilaria Genus found in the evergreen forests of South East Asia while its history dates back to over 2,000 years. These trees grow well in places that enjoy good rainfall and high altitude and are hence well suited to be grown in Malnad. Though agarwood can be grown in a variety of soils, forest soil that is rich in organic content is considered ideal for its growth. No wonder, they are replacing most other shade trees that were planted hitherto as intercrops in coffee, areca nut,

coconut and cardamom estates. All that agarwood requires is good care in its very first year in the form of regular deweeding, support with sticks and some amount of shade to shield it from overexposure to sunlight.

Ideal for Malnad

“Special irrigation is also not needed to these plants. The water we provide for areca trees are sufficient for agar plants too,” says K M Mallappa Hegde, who has planted agar in his areca nut estate about four years ago. According to him, when the rising failure of other crops and their increasing production costs are taken into account, agarwood is the ideal intercrop for Malnad. It can also be grown as the main crop or border crop, he adds.

The production of agar is quite interesting. When agarwood trees are damaged either naturally or artificially, fungus enters the tree.

As the infection spreads, the tree produces a dark aromatic resin in response to the fungal attack which results in a dark, resin embedded heartwood. This resinous wood, when separated from the tree, forms the main ingredient of many sweet smelling perfumes and medicines all over the world. However, agarwood trees can be harvested only when the production of the aromatic trunk is complete and the tree starts drying up.

Farmers prefer agar to sandalwood

A crop that has no equals in the field of natural incense, agarwood is gaining more popularity than sandalwood. In fact, many farmers now prefer agarwood to sandalwood as it promises returns higher than sandalwood and is quite safe as it cannot be easily poached. According to Murthy who has about 30 sandalwood trees in his plantation, keeping a watch on them is a major problem.

“Very often, we have poachers coming in the dead of night to cut branches off sandalwood trees to check if they are mature. If they find them ideal to be sold in the market, they just fell the trees and transport them. However, agarwood is quite safe as it is difficult for poachers to extract it from the tree. Moreover, the absence of an open market for agar dissuades poachers,” he says.

A thought seconded by Vijay Angadi, State Environment Award winner and honorary director, Punyabhoomi, Hassan, too. “Agarwood is a wonderful tree. It is common knowledge as to what happens to sandalwood saplings by the time they grow, mature and prove to be profitable to planters.

Moreover, it takes nearly 25-30 years for sandalwood to fetch us returns. In such a scenario, agarwood has come as a welcome crop to Malnad region as it takes only 8-15 years to mature and fetch us good returns,” he says.

Sensing the huge market potential of agarwood, The Vanadurgi Agarwood India Ltd., based in Sringeri, is helping out planters in Malnad to cultivate the crop by providing them with seedlings, technical know-how and the necessary support till the produce is harvested, processed and marketed. Available in a variety of forms – chips, flakes, powder, pieces, timber, logs, oil –

agarwood is priced according to the density of wood and resin, their purity, aroma, colour, shape and size.

While superior grade agarwood costs over Rs 30,000 per kg, agar oil costs over Rs 10 lakh per kg in the retail market.

Sadly, this crop is on the verge of extinction and in an effort to promote its cultivation, the Central Government, through its Department of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH), provides 75 per cent subsidy for agar cultivation.

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