

## Women coconut pollinators scale new heights

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*It takes 5- 10 minutes for them to complete the work on a single tree*



New prospects: A woman climber bagging the receptive flower.- Photo: Special Arrangement

The coconut pollination (technically referred to as hybridisation) sector, once a men's monopoly in Kerala, is today being conquered successfully by women also. Seed-nuts of hybrid coconut palms are produced through artificial pollination. In Kasaragod district, the friends of coconut trees programme (FoCT) for training women in coconut pollination organized by the Central Plantation Crops Research Institute (CPCRI), evoked good response from enterprising women. Thirty-four ladies, mostly house-wives, underwent training in pollination techniques, an area all along dominated by men. In addition, 207 unemployed rural youth were also trained in the techniques.

### Considered a tough job

Earlier women were not much interested in climbing the trees it was always considered a tough job and a male bastion. But today they want to prove they are also capable and on par with men in farm work. Feedback studies show that the training programme in artificial pollination done by women is a big hit among rural women in the region as it helps in their financial empowerment. Among the five groups functioning in the district now, two groups comprise only women. "From the usual women dominated leaf plating, broom making, and copra drying for instance, women started climbing the trees, harvesting nuts, cleaning the crown, carrying out plant protection methods, and today they are happy that our institute has played a major role in making them pollinators," says Dr. V. George, Director, CPCRI. The programme is funded by the Coconut Development Board (CDB). Coconut pollination technique is a highly skilled activity which has to be done on newly opened inflorescence located on the crown of the tree. It takes only 5-10 minutes to pollinate a bunch on the tree.

## **Different steps**

The different steps in this technique are pollen collection and processing, removal of male flowers from the inflorescence, tying a bag on the inflorescence, dusting of pollen, confirming the receptive stage of female flowers, repeating the same procedures till the last flower comes to receptivity, and removal of the cloth bag after ensuring that the last button is also pollinated. These laborious steps demand expertise, sound knowledge on floral biology of coconut trees, and good skill. Climbing the tree and sitting on top of the crown to pollinate is a difficult job since the trees keep swaying during heavy winds. Also the height of the tree creates a scare in some climbers.

## **Number of times**

The pollinator needs to climb a tree at least 5-6 times to pollinate a bunch. On the first day he/she has to remove the male flowers from the opened inflorescence and cover the bunch with a bag. From the second day onwards (some times alternative days) they need to pollinate according to the receptive stage of the female flower.

There are two parts in procedure one the lab scientists keep the pollen (processed male flowers ready) and the women climbers take it with them to be sprayed on matured female flowers in the crown. At present a private contractor selected through the institute pays Rs.600 a day for each woman climber who pollinates 20-22 trees in a day. "Though the main objective of the programme was to address the problem of labour shortage, it has changed the social status of coconut climbers as they are known today, as skilled professionals in the sector." Their services are highly valued by the coconut farmers of the locality and nearby panchayaths because of their dedication and sincerity towards their profession," says Dr. George.

## **Daily labourers**

Before attending this training programme the women worked as daily labourers, able to earn hardly Rs. 100 per day. But after attending the training and doing it as a full time work their income has improved. "The women are doing an excellent job in a professional manner. Unlike some male coconut climbers, women are not addicted to alcohol and do not absent themselves from work. "Once they commit they are on the job. It is heartening to see them comfortably sitting on top of the coconut tree carrying out with ease the different operations," says Chethan, a coconut garden owner, who has made use of the women training skills in his farm. It takes only 5-10 minutes for these women to do the pollination work for a tree. The process needs to be repeated 4-5 times for ensuring good yield and the workers are engaged on a contract.

For details readers can contact  
Dr. George V. Thomas, Director,  
CPCRI, Kasaragod: 671-124,  
email: [georgevthomas@yahoo.com](mailto:georgevthomas@yahoo.com),  
[directorcpcri@gmail.com](mailto:directorcpcri@gmail.com), phone: 04994- 232333.