

Papaya's prospects look good due to ready markets

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Untapped: Mr. Rajarathnam, papaya grower from Mettupalayam, says there is enormous potential for marketing the fruit. — Photo: Special arrangement

A ready market for produce becomes a big bonus for growers. "Whatever be the crops grown, availability of an immediate selling point and a good price from a prompt buyer encourages a farmer to grow more," says Mr. S. Rajaratnam, a progressive papaya grower from Mettupalayam region, Tamil Nadu. The farmer is presently cultivating red lady variety papaya (well known in the region) in about 75 cents and is able to earn more than Rs. 2 lakhs in 15 months.

Not an issue

"The acreage of cultivation is not a big issue but the price is," he says and adds, "crops can be in a few cents or 30 acres; what is really important is immediate sale. There must not be a glut in sales if farmers need to earn some money." The reason for selecting papaya according to him is that in Mettupalayam and surrounding areas like Palladam, Satyamangalam and Chenampatti several farmers are growing this crop and are marketing the fruits in Delhi, Mumbai, Kerala, and Kolkata, thus earning a good income.

"Unlike other fruit crops, papaya does not demand much work. The farmer needs to source the seedling from a good authorised source and take care of the crop for 6-7 months.

"The fruits come to harvest in about a year and half. The important beneficial aspect in papaya is that we need not look for labour for pruning as labour is very scarce in the State today," he says. There are several private buyers in the region who discuss and decide the price with the concerned farmer and also bring their own manual labour to pluck and pack the fruits after mutual consent. "The truth is that there is enormous potential for marketing the fruit and till date I feel the papaya market has not been fully exploited," he says.

Income

The farmer has been able to earn about Rs. 2, 30,000 as gross income from his 600 trees in the last one and half years. "Since all the trees are grown organically, I did not spend much for the maintenance. Except for installing sprinkler irrigation all the necessary inputs are sourced at the farm itself." "I started harvesting the fruits from June 2012 and till date harvested 100 kg of fruits from each tree. I expect the same yield to continue for the another six months," says Mr. Rajarathnam. His suggestion to other farmers is to grow tree crops along with fruit crops. For instance he has planted melia dubia (malai vembu in Tamil) tree seedlings in between the papaya trees. The seedlings act as effective wind breakers during monsoon and heavy winds and protect the tender papaya tree stems from breaking. The trees can be cut from the third or fourth year after planting, and fetch a good price for wood in the local market.

Pest infestations

Regarding pest attacks, the farmer says that “mealy bug is a common infestation that affects all papaya varieties in Tamil Nadu. The pest appears like a white powder coating on the fruits. There have been a lot of efforts to control this infestation both organically and conventionally.”But I have not faced much problem from it probably because I practice only natural and sustainable methods for cultivation.”Along with the papaya trees the farmer is also maintaining a nursery called Eden gardens.

The nursery has been identified as ‘New Rural Industry’ under the National Innovation Project of ICAR, New Delhi and is also a registered member in the Agri Business Incubator model of Tamil Nadu Agriculture University (TNAU), Coimbatore.

Certification

“Our nursery is a certified bamboo nursery by the Forest College and Research Institute, TNAU, Mettupalayam. Recently we have developed a new technology for propagation of plants using their leaves. It is a very simple technique and can be easily used by a farmer to propagate any plant varieties of his choice using this method,” he explains.

For details contact

Mr. S. Rajarathnam,

No 23/15- Karuppayamal thottam,

Vellipalayam road, Mettupalayam,

Tamil NAdu: 641301,web: edennurserygardens.com,

mobile: 094860-94670 and 94860-94660.