

Mulching increases yield for a cardamom planter

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At a time when many cardamom farmers in Kerala are incurring an expenditure of nearly Rs. 7-8 lakh annually towards input cost, Mr. Paulose in Idukki district incurs less than 50 per cent of normal expenses to manage his entire 40-acre farm.

The farmer is credited with spending less on chemical inputs and maximising production by adopting low cost traditional practices.

Initially he was cultivating pepper and ginger in half an acre but gave it up due to labour problems and shifted to cardamom cultivation.

New variety

His family owned six acres of cardamom plantation. He isolated a few clumps with long panicle and bold capsules and expanded this new variety to his entire garden. With steady income he acquired 28 acres near his lands.

“All this was possible by reducing the input cost while doubling the yield. Agriculture is more profitable than any other profession,” says Mr. Paulose.

The farmer was conferred two awards by the Spices Board of India for highest productivity in cardamom. Within three decades of involvement and work, he developed eco-friendly traditional practices which reduced the cost of inputs in cardamom cultivation and maximised the yield.

About two decades back, he noticed that whenever there was rain fall, water runs off quickly from the field. He observed that there is more moisture in the areas where soil is covered with leaves and twigs. He decided not to remove the fallen leaves and twigs or small branches from his field; (such leaves/twigs obtained while pruning the trees are usually removed by labourers for fuel wood purpose).

“This practice has helped in arresting run-off of rain water from my field and improved the texture of the soil with more compost due to decomposition of organic matter,” he says.

Humus content

The accumulation of fallen leaves and twigs of shade trees made into a thick cover of mulch with more than one-foot depth. These leaves become decomposed by in-situ composting process. Thus humus content is higher in his garden compared to neighbouring plantations and the soil bulk density is very low. On examining the top layer of the ground, real soil can be traced only at a depth of 10 cm, all the above layers are filled with decomposed plant/ tree materials that has been lying in the field for more than 20 years.

The best indicator for good organic content in the soil is to hold a handful of soil and roll it to form a ball. In normal fields it forms a ball due to presence of soil content in the top soil where as in Paulose's field it does not form a ball and gets crumbled as a friable mass due to the presence of high organic matter.

Several advantages

According to the farmer mulching has many advantages. The plant grows healthy and fast and pest attack is quite minimum.

Usually cardamom plants are replanted with new suckers (by planting the clumps) within 8-10 years of cultivation.

But in Paulose' farm, the plantation is continued successfully for 18 years with compact clumps and the crop is still healthy, giving maximum yield (28-32 panicles) compared to other local varieties which bear less. There is no need for weeding as the soil is not exposed and self shade of cardamom clumps suppresses weed growth; farmers in other plantations incur cost for weeding where mulch is less, or soil is exposed.

Visitors

In other farmers fields, cardamom plants tillers go wide apart due to rotting of rhizomes in the centre after five or six years after planting. So far 200 farmers visited the cardamom plantation of Paulos over the last six years.

This thick mulch brought miracles in his field, withstood severe drought when other plantations were wilting in neighbouring fields. On an average

Mr. Paulose harvests about 2-5 kg of dried cardamom from a single plant. From an acre he has obtained around 2,000 kg of dry cardamom . The average price was around Rs.700 per kg and the farmer gets a premium price of 10-40 per kg because of bigger sized capsules.

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