

## New lease of life for rare mango species

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While most farmers grow and sell crops, only a few, out of interest, take the less travelled road to find and conserve something for the benefit of society. K.S. Jegannatha Raja, a small farmer from Rajapalayam, Tamil Nadu, has discovered some rare varieties of mangoes specific to the region, and taken upon himself the task of conserving them.

A variety called *Panjavarnam* is famous in Virudhu Nagar and Madurai districts. It comes to bearing from February-April. A 15-20-year old tree bears about 1,000 fruits annually. A fruit weighs 250-300 gm and tastes very sweet. About 100 years ago, people preserved the variety by soaking it in honey. The fruits were used mostly for domestic consumption rather than export. "That is perhaps the reason it has not been very popular," says Mr. Raja.

According to P. Vivekanandan, Executive Director, Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Voluntary Action (SEVA), Virattipathu, Madurai, another variety called *Puliyadi* bears fruit in March-April. Its taste is superior to that of the Alphonso variety, he claims. Mr. Raja has been able to promote 500-800 seedlings of this variety among his contacts in the last 10 years.

The Periyakulam Horticulture College under the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore, has classified *Puliyadi* as an endangered variety. When Mr. Raja displayed it in an exhibition at a seminar in 2003 at Rajapalayam, experts were stunned. A decade ago, only 30 trees of this variety were found and today, thanks to the farmer's tireless efforts, the variety can be found in and around the Rajapalayam region like W. Pudhipatti, Maharajapuram, and Kansapuram in the Srivilliputhur taluk.

The farmer is also credited with saving another rare and extinct mango variety called *Pottalma*. This comes to bearing in February-May, and a 20-year-old tree yields about 500 kg of fruits. Over the last 10

years, Mr. Raja has propagated 500 grafts and distributed them to local farmers. He also identified *Karuppatti kai* (Palmyrah jaggery). This variety comes to bearing in February-May and yields 800- 1,000 fruits a year. Even after ripening, the fruits remain green.

“New hybrid varieties have wiped out the native species. I have been struggling to find some export contact for these fruits. But, sadly, exporters are totally ignorant of these varieties and do not want them,” says Mr. Raja.