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## **Date palm takes root in Nellai soil**

By P. Sudhakar

TIRUNELVELI, APRIL 9. Date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) is no more confined only to the Gulf region, as a leading farmer here has planted 1,100 saplings of high-yielding varieties of this desert fruit on over 11 acres at Panneerkulam, about 35 km from here, after another Dharmapuri-based planter harvests an attractive yield of dates for the past few years.

Though his friends discouraged S.V.S.P. Jagadeesh Raja when he decided to go for date palm cultivation on his barren land, the younger brother of S.V.S.P. Manicka Raja, King of Kadambur Zamin and chairman of Kayathar union in Tuticorin district, visited the date farm of S. Nizamudeen at Krishnapuram in Dharmapuri district, as the latter had established an excellent ranch exclusively for the dates with the high-yielding date seeds he had brought from Saudi Arabia, country, which ranks first in the world to produce 300 varieties of dates from over 23 million date trees.

As Mr. Nizamudeen had been employed in a date seed-processing farm in a Gulf state, he could test his fortune with the varieties such as Hajuva, Makthumian, Sukri, Kalima and Muscat when he returned 12 years ago to his native village, a hot region with lesser quantity of salty water for irrigation.

Despite all these hurdles, he got 250 kg of dates a year per tree, fetching Rs.50 per kg.

"Encouraged by this result, I visited this farm last year and bought the date saplings from Mr. Nizamudeen. The saplings we have planted on over 11 acres are being watered with drip irrigation and nourished only with organic manure. I strongly believe that if a man, who can get 250 kg of dates per tree per year despite all adverse conditions, particularly alkaline land with salty water, I will certainly get an attractive yield," Mr. Jagadeesh Raja told *The Hindu* .

The Deputy Director of Horticulture, Tirunelveli, K.A. Syed Kader Oli, who visited this farm with his team of officials, including the Assistant Directors of Horticulture of Tirunelveli and Tuticorin, G. Mohan and A. Francis Vedamanickam, recently, said steps had been taken to introduce date palm varieties like Khadri, Saqee and Sughara (small) to some innovative farmers on a research and development basis to ascertain the feasibility and performance of this new crop to this region.

Dates need temperature ranging from 30 to 45 degree Celsius and a rainfall of 200 to 250 mm per year for a conducive growth. The date palm, which can withstand successive bouts of drought, needs only a little attention, but gives an income of 10 times more than what the coconut provides.

"Though the per head consumption is low in the country, India stands first in importing 4

lakh tonnes of dates every year. The farmers will have to spend around Rs.15,000 to 20,000 per acre, but the returns will be higher Rs. 6 lakhs per acre from 10th year onwards even if the crop starts yielding from the 5th year onwards," said S. Raja Mohammed, a horticulture officer.

Now, the officials here are keen on cultivating this crop in the coastal regions as a highly lucrative `green shield' in the wake of the tsunami, instead of planting less remunerative casuarina or other trees since the trunk of date palm is so strong.

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