



Wonder cardamom- a new variety of cardamom

Plant Variety

State Award- Kerala

Sabu Varghese

Idukki, Kerala

Scout: Peermade Development Society

Background

Sabu Varghese has developed a drought-resistant cardamom variety that he calls 'Wonder cardamom'. This variety can also be grown in rubber plantations at lower altitude. The specialty of the variety is that it has branched panicles.

Sabu is a small farmer with five acres of land in Idukki district, a place covered by thick forests where sometimes even sunlight does not penetrate the canopy. Tribal communities are the original inhabitants of this place.

Unavailability of cultivable land elsewhere forced the people to migrate to this hilly district. Sabu's parents migrated to Valiya thovala from Thodupuza in 1954. Paddy, yam and tapioca were their major food crops but attacks by wild animals and the higher market value of cash crops made them take up the financially lucrative crops like rubber, which was most suitable for the area.

Since his childhood, Sabu was drawn to nature and he enthusiastically watched every sprout of plants. He is a cycling and swimming enthusiast. Of

course, he liked to study but he liked better to help his father in farming. Now Sabu lives here with his wife and five young daughters and grows a wide variety of crops including cardamom, pepper, rubber, clove, vanilla, coconut and banana. Cardamom followed by pepper fetch him the highest returns.

Genesis

His favorite pastime was to collect and grow different plants collected from various places. While dabbling with cardamom, he observed one plant to be morphologically distinct from other plants in the entire plantation.

This plant was tall and bore numerous long tillers; branched panicles and also the size of its capsules was significantly bigger than those of other plants. He grew a seedling from one ripe capsule of this plant in 1992. The offspring turned out to be very robust and healthy bearing bold capsules.

By 1999-2000, he had produced around 250 such plants through vegetative propagation. He says that though the occurrence of variation was accidental, the evolution of the new superior variety, which took

seven long years from 1992 to 1999, was a result of his own efforts. He named the variety after the name of his house Vanderkunel. He thinks that the source of the variety may have been a race he had collected but could not recall much more.

In the evolution of this variety, his wife's contribution needs a special mention. She shares his genuine passion and interest in collection, cultivation, identification and isolation of plants from different sources. She tends the plants like her own children carefully watering, manuring and nurturing them. It was her who, walking across the farm one day observed a plant with different traits (branched panicles with bold capsules) and informed her husband about it. Then from that single plant, Sabu started his experiments and developed the – 'Wonder cardamom'.

Innovation

Plants of the new variety are robust and bushy with very long shoots and deep green foliage.

A single plant bears 30 to 50 tillers per clump each bearing, on average, three panicles. Panicles are



branched and very long ranging from 1.5 to 2.0 meters with short internodes. Each panicle bears 25-35 racemes each bearing 15-30 capsules. Capsules are extra bold in size with deep green color.

The yield per plant is 3.0 to 4.0 kg of dry cardamom compared to 2.5-3.0 kg in Njallani- the most popular variety of the region. One kilogram carries around 3800-5000 capsules. Other most important feature possessed by this farmer-bred variety, which has caught the attention of the scientific community, is a) the variety happens to highly adaptable to planting at lower altitudes and lower rainfall regions, which are traditionally known as non-cardamom belts and b) it can be taken as the intercrop with the rubber plantations.

Such is the demand of his variety that he has distributed around 50,000 plants since 2001 to thousands of farmers in various places like Wyanad, Idukki, Kottayam, Kodaikanal (Tamilnadu) and Madakkara (Karnataka). Many leading planters of the state have already switched to this variety and a large number of them come back to him for more seedlings. He feels that this is the greatest recognition for him and the best certificate of the superiority of his variety.

When we asked about the society's role in promoting his innovation, he diplomatically states, "In our society seventy-five percent of the people will support and the remaining twenty-five percent will at any cost always give negative opinion". However, he is thankful that in his case there has been good support all through from all quarters. He says three factors that are critical for wide diffusion and recognition of an innovation are, 'recognition of the government body or an agency, quality of the product, and publicity by the media'.

He is a cardamom award winner of the Spices Board during 2001-02 and was also recognized and felicitated by the Honey Bee Network during the Shodhyatra in December 2005, which has given a great boost to his confidence. His interest to de-

velop more varieties has grown many fold since then.

He was invited to NIF's informal Research Advisory Committee meeting in May 2006 to interact with fellow innovators and also given a chance to participate in the traditional food festival, Saatvik, organized by SRISTI-NIF in November 2006.

His ambition in life is to evolve superior varieties of various crops and convert his farmland into a model plantation as well.

