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During the International Year of Women Farmers declared by the United Nations, women farmers in Kerala are continuing to make progress not only in food security, nutrition access and poverty eradication, but also in a comprehensive area. The role of women in the systems from planting to selling agricultural products is important. At the same time, the challenges they face are many. Women are not far behind in creating new movements in society for economic security. Women farmers in a village called Kalliyur in Thiruvananthapuram district are looking for different methods beyond conventional farming.

Chendumalli fields where dreams bloom

Richard Joseph

Sreelatha, who used to grow only vegetables all year round, turned to a different type of farming last year. Chendumalli farming, or marigold farming. She started it not as a profitable farming but for a special interest. But Sreelatha, who grows flowers in Kalliyur, a farming village in Thiruvananthapuram district, says that the joy and recognition she gets through flower farming is immense. Although flower cultivation is carried out throughout the year, Sreelatha and her team mainly cultivate flowers for the Onam market. Yellow and orange chendumalli seedlings are planted here.

Sreelatha and her women's group cultivate flowers at a place called Kulangara under the Kalliyoor Krishi Bhavan in Thiruvananthapuram district. Her husband Raveendran is also there to help. Her son Sreejith is also very interested in farming. Sreelatha says that flowers are in highest demand in Kerala during the days from Atham to Thiruvonam. An average of 250 to 350 grams of flowers can be obtained from a healthy plant. If cultivated carefully, flower farming can be made profitable. Sreelatha says that if we are careful, we can grow the flowers we need in our fields, backyards, and terraces.

Biodiversity conservation

Farmers play a significant role in preserving biodiversity in the farm. Raji, who cultivates flowers with Sreelatha in Kalliyoor, says that flower cultivation can help maintain and protect biodiversity. From the moment the flower buds open, butterflies and other insects become active in the garden. In addition, various species of butterflies and moths arrive. As the flowers bloom, bees also arrive to collect pollen, and the garden comes alive. Raji also says that the traditional knowledge gained is very helpful in

flower cultivation. They are also able to pass on the knowledge of flower cultivation to the new generation. Many people from the new generation visit these women farmers every day to learn about the ins and outs of flower cultivation. Along with Sreelatha, Roselet Ratnam, Swarnalekha, Sheeja and Raji also cultivate here.

Seedlings sprouted from seeds

Seedlings sprouted from seeds are used for planting here, says S.K. Shinu, Agriculture Assistant at Kalliyoor Krishi Bhavan. Since it is cross-pollinated, the expected color of the flowers may change when cultivated using seeds. Not only that, the flowers of plants grown by sprouting native seeds are smaller in size, which also reduces their marketability. However, if hybrid varieties are cultivated, more yield will be obtained. Young stems of 6 to 10 centimeters long can be cut and rooted and then planted in the field to produce flowers. However, he says that the method of cutting and rooting stems is not practical for industrial farming.

Not native, foreign

African marigold and French marigold are the main varieties cultivated here. Of these, women farmers here attest that African marigold is the most suitable variety for flower cultivation during the Onam season. African marigold has flowers in yellow, orange, gold, and white. African marigold has thick petals and round flowers. Therefore, 15 to 25 flowers are enough for one kilo of flowers. African plants grow to a height of about two and a half feet. French marigolds come in a variety of colors, but are used for ornamental purposes. African marigolds are a suitable variety for commercial cultivation and home growing in Kerala.

Laborious work

The first step in chendumari cultivation is to prepare a bed one foot high by digging the area where the seeds are to be planted. Then, the sand is mixed with cow dung powder, compost, chicken manure, and Trichoderma, mixed and leveled, and the seedlings are planted. The seedlings are grown here by themselves. Seedlings are produced on an industrial basis by germinating them in protrays in nurseries. The seedlings are grown by mixing de-fibered cottonseed compost, dried cow dung powder, or compost in a ratio of 3:1, filling them with protrays and planting seeds in them. The plants need good sunlight for growth. If there is no sunlight, the seedlings will grow towards the sunlit side.

100 seedlings per cent

About 100 seedlings are required to cultivate one cent of land. After the land is well dug, the clods are broken and two to three kilograms of lime or dolomite are added to the soil and mixed. After 10 to 15 days, furrows are

made at a distance of one and a half to two feet. The land is prepared for planting seedlings by putting topsoil and cow dung, compost or other organic fertilizer in the furrows dug to a depth of one hand and mixing them with the soil. 100 to 150 kilograms of organic fertilizer are given as base fertilizer per cent. Two plants are planted at a distance of 45 centimeters. The seedlings transplanted to the field should be strong. Seedlings that are free from diseases and pests are selected for planting. They say that it is best to transplant in the evening.

Pinch the top

After 25-30 days of transplanting the seedlings, the top should be pinched. Doing this will help them grow more branches from the sides and bloom better. Each new branch will have many buds and will produce more flowers. Since it is the rainy season, there is also a method of tying small branches to support the plants so that they do not fall over and damage the flowers. The flowers will start blooming within 40 to 45 days of planting. Extreme care should be taken from the moment the flowers start blooming. Great care should be taken in subsequent fertilization and irrigation.

Beware of pests

Sreelatha says that chendumalli cultivation is a crop that is very susceptible to pest infestation. Various pests can be affected at different stages. The main one is the weevil. There are also problems like fungus and powdery mildew. Therefore, timely care is required. Irrigation is also very important. This should not be increased or decreased. If fertilization is done scientifically, flowers can be picked from 40 days after planting. A lot of flowers will start to appear from 60 days. These women farmers testify that they can get up to two kilos of flowers from one plant.
