

THE COUNTRY POTATO

By

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Botanical names :

Coleus tuberosus, Benth ; *Coleus parviflorus*, Benth ; *Plectranthus tuberosus*, Bl. Family—*Labiatae* or the Tulasi family.

Local names :

Tamil-Kurka or Chiru-Kizhangu ; Malayalam Koorkan
Kannada—Sambrani gadde.

The plant is a small herb growing to a height of about a foot in good soils and characterised by a bunch of small underground root tubers. The leaves are dark green, round and thick. They are said to be somewhat aromatic and used for flavouring. The plant as grown in Nileshwar has no perceptible aroma though the tubers and roots when freshly pulled out are faintly aromatic. This plant is not related to the ordinary potato in any way except that the tubers resemble small potatoes to some extent.

This is a less known vegetable of South India cultivated in Tinnevely, Travancore, South Malabar and in parts of South Kanara. Outside India it is found in cultivation in Africa, Ceylon, Malaya, Cochin-China and in Java where it is said to be plentiful. Though the plant has been known to have been cultivated in India and far Eastern countries, for many centuries it is considered by botanists to be a native of Africa.

The tubers are tasty when made into curries and are fairly rich in protein (about 2 % on wet basis and 8 % dry basis) the tubers can also be used for many purposes to which the potato is put. There is always a good market for the tubers in South Kanara and in season they fetch about Rs. 2—8—0 per maund of 28 lb. whole sale, while retail they are sold at anything from 2 to 4 annas per pound. Considering the fact that the sweet potato during the same season rarely sells for more than Re. 1/- per maund, this is an attractive price ; and it leaves a very good margin of profit over the cost of cultivation. This paying crop can be easily raised even in the barren sandy soils of the West Coast as I have done on my farm. It can also be grown on the laterite gravelly soils of the west coast hills as a monsoon crop.

But strangely enough, this useful crop is not known and grown as widely as it deserves to be. Therefore, the object of my writing this note is to bring this food-cum-vegetable crop to the notice of the public in the hope that more people may take to its cultivation in these days of food scarcity. Further the size of the tuber as obtained at present is rather small, although by light manuring, on my sandy soil I have raised much bigger tubers than I have ever seen in the market. I should therefore like to draw the attention of plant breeders to this useful crop so that they may improve the quality and size of the tuber by selection and breeding and make it more attractive to the public.

Cultivation :

The details furnished here refer only to the sandy soil of the Nilshwer coastal strip. The soil of my farm is practically pure sand and consequently very porous. The annual rainfall is about 140 inches of which about 100 inches are received during June, July and August. During the rainy months, the water table is high, just a few feet below the ground level. In summer the water table goes down to about 20 feet below the ground level. Due to the open nature of the soil there is never any water stagnation in the field.

Seeds and sowing :

The plant is propagated either by planting the tubers or by vegetative cuttings. Seed tubers picked at the harvest are generally preserved till the time of sowing in the following season. It is necessary to keep only a small quantity of seed tubers for starting a fresh crop.

No special methods are necessary for preserving the seed tubers; they can be kept in straw or in gunny bags so as to prevent excessive drying. This way they can be kept for several months without deterioration.

In stiff soils, seed tubers and cuttings are planted on tops of raised bunds a few inches high. The bunds may be a foot apart and tubers or cuttings are planted 8 to 10 inches apart in a row. In sandy soils, I have found it best to plant them in level plots. The planting is done with the onset of the South west monsoon in June. Germination takes place within 10 days after planting. The tubers often sprout before planting just-like a potato. As the plants grow rapidly if well

manured, three or four cuttings may be taken in the first month. Therefore only small nursery of three or four cents is necessary for planting an acre. Cuttings or setts are obtained by nipping off the tips of the branches with a couple of nodes and the leaves at the top. The setts are planted with the lower nodes in the soil. They strike root in 3 to 4 days.

Manuring :

In the sandy soils, with the heavy South-west monsoon rains, manuring has to be done a little at a time, but often. I used a basic dose of cattle manure while making the beds and later applied ash, and a mixture of groundnut cake powder and superphosphate, three times at intervals of a fortnight or three weeks.

The best manure for the crop or the dosage are not known. In the first trial plot on which the crop was grown and for which I kept accounts the manure and cost per acre worked out as follows :

		lb.	Rs. A. P.
Cattle manure	....	5000	50—0—0
Ash	....	1000	6—0—0
Groundnut cake meal	....	1050	54—0—0
Superphosphate	....	112	10—0—0
			Rs. 120—0—0

After Cultivation :

No special after-cultivation was done except a little weeding. The trailing branches may be lifted up once or twice a month during the first two months to prevent them rooting at the nodes which results in the formation of small tubers. When planting is done on ridges, earthing up has to be done as the plant grows, to widen the ridges so as to provide sufficient space for the formation of tubers.

Watering :

The monsoon crop does not require any watering. Also the subsequent crops grown in rice fields after the harvest of rice are not watered as the moisture in the soil is found sufficient for the good growth of the crop.

Harvest:

In four months after planting the setts, the crop is ready for harvest. Yellowing of the portions of the plant is a sign of maturity of the tubers. In sandy soils no implements are required for lifting the tubers, but in heavier soils a digging fork or mamooty will have to be used. An yield of about 3000 lbs. of tubers per acre can be expected.

The vegetative cuttings obtained from the crop can be utilised for planting in single crop wetlands of the tract after the harvest of the rice crop.

Cost of cultivation:

Initial cost of seed tubers 20 lbs. @ 4 annas per lb.	Rs. 5-0-0
Ploughing twice for preparing beds and ploughing in cattle-manure	Rs. 3-0-0
Planting tubers, preparing and planting cuttings 10 women @ 4 annas each	Rs. 2-8-0

After cultivation:

Two weedings 10 women	Rs. 2-8-0
Lifting branches, if necessary	Rs. 2-0-0

Manures and Manuring:

Cost of manure	Rs. 120-0-0
Application of manure	Rs. 5-0-0
Harvesting 100 maunds at one anna per maund	Rs. 6-4-0
Assessment on land	Rs. 1-0-0

Total Rs. 147-4-0

Receipts:

The yield is taken as only 100 maunds (2,800 lbs. per acre) This is a very modest estimate. The lowest wholesale price is Rs. 2-8-0 per maund. This makes the gross receipts Rs. 250/- per acre. An earlier or later crop will easily sell for twice that price. But even at the lower figure the net income works out to over Rs. 100/- per acre. When it is considered that the land on which this crop is grown was purchased outright for an average price of Rs. 50/- per acre in 1943-'44 the net income of Rs. 100/- per acre is not too bad.

On the West coast there are tens of thousands of acres of this type of sandy soil lying uncultivated. At least part of this vast area can be brought under this paying and useful food crop in these days of food scarcity. I may add that the country potato is said to do better in drier tracts than in the coastal regions with high humidity. As such it appears desirable to try it in the central districts also.

Acknowledgement :

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