

## Cultivation of Bananas for Leaves in Tanjore District

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Banana, besides being an important food crop capable of yielding on an average 20,000 to 25,000 lb. of food per acre in a year, is also a valuable money crop. The intensive cultivation of bananas is practised mostly for its fruits. Its cultivation for the purpose of leaves, except in parts of the Tanjore district and to a very little extent in Tiruchirappalli district, is not known anywhere else. In other parts of the State, one or two ratoon crops of bananas for bunches are taken after the main plant crop; subsequent to this, all the suckers of the harvested plants are allowed to grow for about four to six months and the leaves are harvested. When the crop is intended for fruits, removing even a single leaf from the plant is strongly objected to by the ryots as it would affect the size and weight of the bunch. Hence the leaves are cut only from the side suckers or from the plantation which is proposed to be destroyed and replanted. In the Tanjore district round about Thiruvayar and in parts of Papanasam taluk, bananas are cultivated for the sake of the leaves. The crop stands in the field for two years. A crop of bunches is taken in the first year plant crop; the ratoon crop, subsequent to the harvest of bunches, is the one for the leaves. The leaf crop in the second year fetches more profit than the first year bunch crop. Such cultivation for the purpose of the leaves extends to about 2,000 acres in the above places.

*Varieties and Planting material:* The varieties planted for leaves are mostly Poovan and Monthan. Poovan is preferred as its leaves (1) have better keeping quality than Monthan, (2) are broader and thicker, and (3) have a pleasant appearance due to the light tinge of purple on the midrib. The leaves of Poovan are said to keep for over ten days while that of Monthan only for about five or six days. The variety Monthan is preferred only for the plantings taken up during June—July (i. e., *Adipattam*) as its harvesting period will then synchronise with the marriage season from August onwards when there is a great demand for the fruits for vegetable purposes. Monthan planted at this period is also said to stand the summer drought better than Poovan. But the main planting season is November—December known as *Karthi-pattam* when Poovan is the main variety.

The suckers for planting purposes are mostly obtained from the perennial areas of Aduthurai and Narasingampet in Kumbakonam taluk, though intensive cultivation of bananas is done in the villages of

Tiruchirapalli district. Both around Aduthurai and Narasingampet, bananas are cultivated on high level lands known as the *padugai* lands without any irrigation. With the receipt of water in the channels, there is a rise of the water table and this helps to increase the soil moisture favouring the growth of bananas. The ryots are of opinion that the suckers obtained from these perennial unirrigated areas have bigger and well developed rhizomes than those raised in wet lands or irrigated crop of Tiruchirapalli district. It is for the same reason that their own local suckers are not made use of for the purpose. It is also believed that since bananas are being cultivated under dry unirrigated, perennial conditions in Aduthurai and round about, the suckers from these plantations are hardy and establish also quickly.

*Harvesting of leaves:* In the first year crop all the suckers are regularly desuckered till the plants come to flower. Once the bunches are thrown, then only are the suckers allowed to grow. At this stage of the crop, a second dose of groundnut cake at the rate of about 1 lb. per plant is given. This application helps both the suckers and the bunch to develop. At the time of harvest of the bunch, the followers-on will be three to four months having attained good growth.

In bananas, it is generally the second year crop that is vigorous in growth and is a better yielder than the planted crop or the second and the subsequent ratoon crops. Usually one or two suckers are allowed to grow big so that good-sized leaves may be obtained from them. According to the fertility of the land, cultural operations and season of the year, two to four leaves per plant are cut for a month. Taking a minimum of two suckers per clump and at an average of two leaves per month per individual plant, about 50 leaves will be harvested in a year from a clump. The leaves produced in the *Kodikal pathi* (betel-vine areas) are usually much bigger and are popularly called the '*Thattu Ilai*' and fetches the maximum price. Only the young and the just 'unfolding tubular' leaf is cut a little above the lamina base leaving six to nine inches. From May to July, a few ryots practice tying up of the unfolding leaves with the leaf sheath fibre to prevent tearing off by wind.

Hundred leaves including about 50 big and 50 small and medium sized ones are tied together into a bundle. The bundling of the leaves is a specialised work of this area and one can easily make out the Tanjore bundle from the bundles of other districts. The leaves are exported to almost all the important towns on the East Coast up to Madras. The ryots either lease out their crop on a contract basis or cut the leaves themselves, bundle them and auction them in the market where the agents for the export merchants purchase them at prevailing rates. The maximum demands are at the marriage seasons when the price for a

bundle of 100 leaves may be up to 12 rupees. During slack periods it may go down sometimes to even one rupee. An average of Rs. 3—0—0 per bundle of 100 leaves may be taken as the average for the year.

The cost of cultivation in the first year amounts approximately to Rs. 500/- while in the second year it is about Rs. 400/- per acre. The receipts for the first year being only of the bunches, is about Rs. 1,000/- on a moderate valuation and in the second year the leaf crop fetches easily Rs. 1,500/- The net profit for the two years is nearly Rs. 1,600/-.

*Possibilities of improvement:* The greatest need of the ryot seems to be better marketing facilities organised on a co-operative marketing basis, which will eliminate the intermediate agents, fetch better returns and help in the quick disposal of the produce.

Since the leaves of bananas are regularly in demand in all the towns and cities of the South, investigations on this aspect of bananas will be of economic importance. The points which have to be considered in the selection of varieties for the purpose are (1) the quick production of leaves (2) good tillering capacity (3) broad and medium thick leaves suitable for packing and capable of standing transport (4) good keeping quality and (5) attractive appearance. A few varieties of the Monthan and Poyan group have the first three characteristics which may well suit the purpose. Investigations on *Musa balbisiana*, Colla (*Ela vazhai* or *Ginjali aratti*) and *Musa textilis*, Nees. (the Manilla Hemp Banana) may also help as these two are seeded bananas, the fruits of which are not edible and as such the consideration of fruits being affected by the cutting of leaves can be well eliminated. It may be mentioned here that there are two wild bananas found in the forests of Western Ghats, *Excoecaria superba* [*Syn. Musa superba* (Kattu vazha or Mala vazha)] *Musa* sp. (*Kattu vazha*) which are made use for the collection of leaves. These leaves collected in the interior of forests are brought down to nearby towns for disposal. One can easily get the leaves of the former, at Kozhikode, and those of the other at Valparai.

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