

Sandal regeneration project gets under way in Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri

P. V. SRIVIDYA KRISHNAGIRI, December 2, 2015



Students making pellets of custard apple seeds, sandal seeds and red gram for regeneration of sandal in reserve forests on Krishnagiri forest range campus. —Photo: N. Bashkaran

Five kg. of custard apple seeds; five kg. of sandal seeds and 2 kg. of red gram tightly bound together in damp red clay and dung are laid out here on the forest range office campus here. These little damp red pellets infused with gel crystal may well hold the key to a future of reserve forests with mature sandal trees in a northern belt that was hitherto known as a Sandal belt.

This ‘pelletisation of sandal seeds’ is part of augmentation of sandal regeneration in reserve forest areas project taken up to cover an area of 3,300 hectares in Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri. A mature sandal tree has traditionally been a seed-

bearer for sandal regeneration, says Ulaganathan, Conservator of Forests, Dharmapuri. After decades of illegal harvesting of live trees by smugglers, there is a shortage of seed-bearers in the forests.

To supply seedlings in the absence of natural regeneration by dispersal of seeds by birds, the department has taken up the task of growing seedlings. “Here, the custard apple seeds will be a permanent host plant, while the red gram seeds will be a temporary host plant. The gel crystals will help in moisture retention (water

management) in the wake of shortage of rainfall,” says Mr. Ulaganathan.

The sandal seeds have been sourced from the Forest Genetics Centre, Coimbatore, Kerala Forest Research Institute, and from Karnataka.

While there is no database for sandal trees in our reserve forests, a criterion for assessment is the availability of seeds for natural regeneration. To counter this human-made chaos, the pelletisation of sandal seeds is an “ensured method of regeneration in RFs”, says Mr. Ulaganathan.

In Krishnagiri and Dharmapuri, over 3,300 hectares are slated to be brought under the sandal regeneration project. Of the total area, 15 percent will be covered by pelletisation. Students, tribes, and anti-poaching watchers have been roped for additional hands to help in making sandal seed pellets.

Pelletisation method is costing the department with Rs.5,000 per hectare. In addition, over 55,000 sandal seedlings are proposed to be planted directly. “100 seedlings can be plant per hectare,” says Mr.Ulaganathan.

As for monitoring, the pellets that would be sunk one inch under the surface will be marked with tailored cloth waste. “They would grow to

become sandal seedlings in 3-4 years, says E. Rajendran, DFO, Krishnagiri.

When, natural sandal regeneration through dispersal of seeds by birds had dwindled due to the lack of mature trees in the forests. Today, there are only 130 metric tonnes of sandal wood in the depots. While the life of a sandal tree would last beyond 45 years, the trees may be ready for harvest three decades from now.

The sandal augmentation project will gain ground in eight other districts of the State including Vellore, Tiruvanamallai, Salem, Namakkal, Erode, Tiruchi, Perambalur and Satyamangalam – once known as a Sandal belt of the State.

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