

# Making Medicinal Plants Profitable

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**M**EDICINAL plants can do magic. Medicine made from natural ingredients, moreover, are affordable and have no side effects, not just for the poor. Unfortunately, the quality of the available plants is so bad, that often the healing powers are spoiled. Due to pollution and unsuitable processing, the plants contain pesticides, fungus, heavy metals and other toxic substances. Local scientists, NGOs and governmental bodies agree that quality must be improved considerably.

To share indigenous knowledge of the plants use and to assess the needs of involved farmers, a workshop on medicinal plants took place recently, organized by DEBTEC, Development of Biotechnology and Environmental Conservation Centre.

"Buy dry tulsi leaves, take it as tea, sweeten it with honey and it will cure your cough," resumes Nilufar Nahar, professor of Chemistry at Dhaka University. "You find most of the edible medical plants in our markets, amloki, bohera or haraloki. But their

quality is so bad, that I would not want to take it as treatment."

Against chronic pain, a Nishinda-leaf-tea might help, as well as against swelling, rheumatism, sores, fever and headache. The juice of Amloki relieves fever and coughs. While the inner parts of the Bohera fruit help against diarrhea, the Hortoki fruits are effective for constipation, dysentery, jaundice, piles, painful menstruation, astringent, fever, coughs, asthma and urinary diseases.

Besides their healing powers, medicinal plants might hide a huge economic potential. In Bangladesh, 90% of all medicinal plants are imported from India. DEBTEC likes to see these imports replaced by high quality Bangladeshi plants.

The farmers expressed their worries about the economic success and their demands of facilities on the DEBTEC workshop. "We now cultivate medicinal plants, but we do not necessarily have the knowledge of how to do it correctly. Further, we have no certainty if we really can sell the plants," said one farmer from Rajshani. "We need training, storage facilities, taxonomy and quality standards and controls and, above all, the people's awareness," a farmer from Chittagong Hill Tracts resumed.

It is not just medicinal plants that lack quality. Other plants too, fruit trees or timber trees for instance, remain of poor quality, because most farmers have no access to quality samplings. Therefore, profit remains low. To change that, a Swiss NGO Intercooperation has assisted local nurseries to build up their stocks, in Rajshani. Contacts between nurseries and the farmers prospered and created a dynamic, market-orientated fruit production in the past years.

As the contacts were set, Intercooperation started to link existing governmental bodies to establish a nationwide supply of high quality samplings and seeds.

As growing these plants can be expensive, Intercooperation aims for a dissemination of the seeds step by step: through nurseries the high quality plants are to be multiplied. Thus the price per plant is lowered and even the majority of poor farmers, depending on their homestead, will have access to these plants, samplings or seeds.

Talks between the governmental bodies and universities started last November. In a slowly ongoing process, MOUs have been established between the NGO, Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC) with its platform called National Agroforestry Working Group (NAWG), Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) and Agricultural Informations Service (AIS).

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