

Flowers bring shine to farmers



A farmer is preparing bundles of gladioli on his field.

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Every morning as the dawn breaks, dew glitters on green leaves and the grass, reflecting the rays of the sun. The tiny bazaar on the Jessore-Benapole highway wakes up to the bales of bicycles and rickshaw-vans, towing flowers.

The open space beneath the branches of century old rain trees starts to fill up with thousands of bright red roses, tube roses, marigolds and gladioli.

In the motley of bright colours, bargain hunters -- flower sellers and buyers get busy with work.

This is Godkhali of Jhikorgachha in Jessore, a hinterland of florists who paint much of their farmlands with colour and provide urban aesthetic seekers the beauty of nature to celebrate festivals and occasions with their loved ones.

Every day, florists in Godkhali and neighbouring areas cater to a bulk of the demand for flowers all over the country.

They pluck at least half a million flowers a day, bring those to Godkhali and sell to wholesalers and middlemen.

Barring certain occasions and festivals, florists get nominal value in exchange of the flowers throughout the year.

Early this month, farmers in the area sold each rose at a price between Tk 0.40 and Tk 0.70. But in the second half of December, prices began climbing. Before Christmas Day, the price of a rose went beyond Tk 2.

"Our earning prospects are linked with demand. If demand is high, we get a better price. Otherwise, our income slumps," said 40-year old florist Nazrul Islam. He was riding a bicycle through colourful landscape on both sides of the street connecting one village to other, on the south end of Godkhali bazaar.

Red rose buds emerge from thick rose gardens that sit next to fields of bright yellow mustard, purple pulses, red, white and pink gladioli, potato and seed beds of paddy.

Almost every family in the area grows flowers along with paddy, potato, jute and other food crops, all around the year. Locals say floriculture provides the income to meet regular expenses for their families.

"It is a good help, even though we have to remain satisfied with very low prices when demand falls in summer and the rainy season," said Islam, "But we have good business in the winter as production falls but demand rises."

Despite price fluctuations, Islam said he is happy with floriculture. He increased his flower production area since 2003, encouraged by a rise in overall demand for flowers.

Changes in people's lifestyles, expectations and taste, due to a steady growth in income, contributed to the rise in demand for flowers.

Traders say the yearly market for flowers now stands at about Tk 100 crore and it created income opportunities for thousands, including farm workers, nursery operators, transport service providers and garland and ribbon makers.

Flowers are now grown on 5,000-10,000 hectares, according to florists and traders.

Farmers say demand for flowers goes up in the winter to summer as there are many events then -- New Year's Day, Valentine's Day, Ekushey, Pahela Baishakh and weddings.

With the New Year just around the bend, Islam and his mates from Patuapara, Panishara and Syedpara, hope to get better prices.

"Demand for flowers shoots up ahead of the New Year's Day. And I am preparing to make use of the opportunity," said Md Shar Ali Sardar, the man who pioneered commercial floriculture in Bangladesh in 1983.

"It is one of the few occasions when we log higher sales," said Sadar, sitting in a small hut next to

produce to local wholesalers at Godkhali bazaar at rates that are determined by wholesale prices in Dhaka, where flowers come from 20 districts, including Jessore, Dhaka (Savar), Jhenidah, Chuadanga, Narayanganj and Mymensingh.

A lack of knowledge on modern post harvesting practices, like grading and sorting, bars them from obtaining fair prices. Also, the traders lack the skills to handle and package flowers to keep those fresh until sale.

At Godkhali bazaar, flowers were being placed on dusty floors with paid workers making bundles using papers, straw and plastic sack rugs. The flowers were then being loaded onto trucks that were also used to carry vegetables to Dhaka.

Truck operators charge between Tk 100-Tk 200 for a flower bundle. Traders and florists say the flowers lose shine in their journey to Dhaka and other major cities because of a lack of after-care practices.

Value addition takes place at the retail level, the major and fourth stage in the flower supply chain. Here, the cost of transportation plays a role in determining the price. Deterioration in the quality also adds to the retail prices.

On Thursday, a rose was sold at Tk 10-Tk 15 at retail level at Shahbagh, against Tk 3-Tk 3.50 at Godkhali.

Islam, however, said he is happy with the local wholesalers, as they cannot offer prices that are much lower than the wholesale rates in Dhaka.

"We get Tk 4 for each rose that sells for Tk 5 in Dhaka. This is possible because we know the price in Dhaka in advance

the past, the traders quoted prices here. Now, for mobile phones, farmers know the rate in Dhaka and charge accordingly."

Shafiqul Islam of Syedpara, Godkhali, earns Tk 500-Tk 1,000 every alternate day from the sale of roses.

"It is quite profitable for us," said Islam, who invested Tk 28,000 to begin cultivation in January. He started getting returns within four months and he claims to have recovered Tk 20,000 since the roses bloomed.

The main reason behind the expansion of floriculture is that farmers do not have to spend money on seedlings every year. A rose plant gives flowers in all seasons for three to four years, while a tube rose blooms for two to three years.

What they do need to invest in is fertilisers, pesticides and workers.

"There is no loss in floriculture. I grew paddy on land earlier. But rose gardening offers better margins," said Islam.

Sardar, the floriculture pioneer, agreed with Islam and said: "Once, the economic condition of the people in this area was bad. But floriculture increased farmers' incomes. It has also increased employment of farm workers," said Sardar, as he packs the fresh gerbera in paper cartoons that are destined for Dhaka.

In less than 100 yards of his hut, three young workers are pouring water to the gerbera plants.

Adjacent to Sardar's garden, a woman does the same at a time when workers at Godkhali bus stoppage are bundling gladioli, tube roses and red roses before loading onto the



his one-acre field covered in red, yellow, pink and white gerbera (a genus of ornamental plants from the sunflower family).

Florists say they sell their

through the mobile phone," said Islam.

Abdur Rahim, president of Godkhali Florists and Traders Welfare Association, agreed. "In

standing truck. Destination is Dhaka and its flower lovers.

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Md Shar Ali Sardar and his assistant prepare flowers to send them to Dhaka.

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A cultivator walks through a gladiolus farm.

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