Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav

BASAI
Biological Agri Solutions Association of India

BASAI News Updates

Sept. 4, 2022

KHARIF CROPS' SOWING AREA 1.5% LOWER THAN LAST YEAR'S: NEW DATA

Zia Haq

letters@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: India's output from the kharif cropping season, which account for nearly half of the country's annual food supply, is likely to be average, with the area sown countrywide lagging last year's levels by around 1.5%, official data as on September 2 showed. Most farm operations for the season are over. The June-September monsoon, which waters nearly 50% of the sown area, was highly uneven this year, damaging crops. →P6

Kharif crops' sowing area 1.5% lower than last year's: New data

Zia Haq

zia.haq@htlive.com

NEW DELHI: India's output from the kharif cropping season, which accounts for nearly half of the country's annual food supply, is likely to be average, with the area sown countrywide lagging last year's levels by around 1.5%, official data as on September 2 showed.

Most farm operations for the season are over. The June-September monsoon, which waters nearly 50% of the sown area, was highly uneven this year, damaging crops. Several states witnessed flooding, while rice belts in northern and eastern India were mostly dry. The area under rice, the summer staple, was 5.6% lower than last year's level, a narrower deficit than in some previous weeks, data showed.

Yet, compared to the average paddy acreage of the past five years (39.7 million hectares), farmers were able to plant 3% less area at 38.3 million hectares. Last year, they had sown paddy in 40 million hectares.

The June-September monsoon was highly uneven this year, damaging crops.

The area under pulses, whose domestic demand is partly met with imports, was also down 4% at 12.9 million hectares, according to the farm ministry's data. Analysts foresee a fall in rice output, anywhere between 5%-10%.

Lower output from extreme weather comes amid a global food crisis sparked by the Ukraine war and lingering supply-chain disruptions. In March, record-breaking heat trimmed India's wheat production by an estimated 2.5% to 106 million tonne, plunging federally held stocks to a 14-year low.

Still, the food ministry expects rice output to be normal, going by its target for procurement of the staple, which refers to the government's purchases of grains for state-held stockpiles.

Despite the lower acreage, the Centre has aims to purchase 51.8 million tonne of summer rice, higher than last year's actual purchase of 50 million tonne, an official release last week said.

The Centre had a rice stockpile of 41 million tonne as on August 1, higher than a mandatory reserve of 13.5 million tonne needed on July 1. "The government will need to release these stocks in the open market to control price rise in basic staples," said Siraj Hussain, a former Union agriculture secretary.

Source HT 4.09.2022 Delhi Edition

Treats shoots and leaves

At a unique plant hospital in Amritsar, there are in-patients, a 'medicare' helpline, even an electric autorickshaw that serves as an ambulance. Treatment is free. 'Our services are a thank-you to those making the world greener,' its co-founders say

Anesha George
anesha.george@hindustantimes.com

None of the patients has a heartbeat, but the emergency care is just as urgent.

Every morning, Geetanjali Mehra, 41, spends her first few waking hours responding to distressed plant owners on WhatsApp, who are worried that their beloved greens won't make it.

"I get about 50 messages a day. Many are about diseased plants, insect attacks. Some are reports from concerned passers-by about 'assaults' on trees," says the interior designer and environmentalist.

Geetanjali and her husband Rohit Mehra, 45, an additional commissioner of income tax, run the Pushpa Tree and Plant Hospital and Dispensary in Amritsar, a one-of-a-kind free facility where, yes, an ambulance does occasionally trundle out of the gates, to ferry a distressed potted patient in for admission.

The facility, inaugurated in January 2020, is named after Geetanjali's late mother, who was a great lover of plants. The hospital occupies 1,200 sq ft within Geetanjali's 1-acre ancestral homestead.

The in-patients have plenty of company here. The Mehras have converted this space into a lush garden. They say it's where their "rescues" are replanted. "We carefully uproot roadside vegetation that is dying of neglect or banyan and peepal roots that sprout through cracks in walls and threaten their structural stability, and bring them here," says Rohit. "Here, they get a second chance at life."

The hospital is funded by donations and the couple's savings. A team of three paid staffers and 10 volunteers, a mix of botanists, gardeners and field operatives, offers 32 types of free services, from nursing plants suffering from infections or infestations back to health, to providing immunity boosters and transplantation advice.

A "medicare" helpline number (89683-39411) also fields calls from across the country, from plant lovers seeking advice. Most questions are tackled in-house, but in severe cases, the hospital reaches out to volunteer consultants and botanical experts. All medication prescribed is organic, Rohit says.

Among the patients that have been treated by this facility is a hibiscus belonging to Amritsar businessman Amit Trikha, 45. He first came upon the service on Facebook, and reached out to the plant helpline in July, after he and his gardener both failed to tackle a mealybug infestation in his beloved plant. "The ambulance promptly arrived at my residence and treated the plant with herbal sprays, which saved it," he recalls. They also inspected the other trees and added nutrients to the soil of a guava tree that wasn't bearing fruit. "A few weeks ago my guava tree started flowering. And it was all free of cost."

The ambulance, incidentally, is a repurposed electric autorickshaw donated by a well-wisher. It is equipped with herbal growth tonics and fertilisers, different types of soil, gardening tools and a portable ladder.

Spread across 1,200 sq ft, the Pushpa Tree and Plant Hospital and Dispensary, co-founded by Geetanjali Mehra (right), has a rescue and rehab garden, a dispensary of herbal growth tonics and fertilisers, volunteers that make house calls and an ambulance that also hands out free saplings.

Root to stem

"People form such strong emotional bonds with their plants, it's even surprising," Geetanjali says. "But many think that the best way of expressing this love is by watering plants, sometime two or three times a day." As a result, the most common panic calls the helpline gets are about root or stem rot.

Across Amritsar, the team is sometimes called in to assess the prospects of trees felled by a storm, save plants that have been poisoned, or assist with tree transplantations. Their most difficult operation so far was reviving a 95-year-old ber (Indian jujube) that had fallen over in a storm last year. "It took five people to lift it, place it back in position and fortify the soil with herbal insecticides," Rohit says. The 12-ft-tall ber is still alive and thriving.

Among the best parts of the job? The follow-up calls of good news. "People proudly send pictures of how the plants are thriving long after treatment," says Geetanjali. "Sometimes we'll hear back from customers because they're moving cities, and want advice on how to move their most sensitive plants."

The helpline gets some strange requests too. "One man asked me to uproot and transplant a disputed mango tree planted by his grandfather, from his brother's property to his own, 20 ft away," says Rohit, adding that he had to politely decline the request. "We can't really help everyone but are glad that people care so much about plants and trees."

Lately, the Mehras have been getting calls from people wanting to set up similar plant hospitals in their cities. "An NGO in Mumbai contacted us; an environmentalist from Rajasthan visited our hospital and noted how little is actually needed for an endeavour of this sort," Rohit says. Why, their plant ambulance even doubles as a "Tree ATM", handing out saplings of native species such as amla and jamun. "Our field staff also brief recipients on how the trees can be nurtured," Rohit says. "It's like a thank-you gift from us to those willing to do their bit to make the world greener."

> Like humans, plants also breathe and breed. They grow, age and decay. If we can be rushed to hospitals and treated for diseases, why not plants?
>
> **ROHIT MEHRA, 45,**
> an additional commissioner of income tax, and co-founder of the tree and plant hospital

READ MOR
How to ace whole-food game in five ingredients

{ SOUND BITES } NATURE'S BASKET

Just take a bite: Why a whole is better than the sum of its parts

Swetha Sivakumar

I want to talk a little bit this week about whole foods, and how they're vanishing from our diets. I don't mean just whole grains but also whole legumes, and fruits and vegetables in their whole forms.

As science makes greater inroads into food, we're slicing and dicing ingredients into chemical components, breaking foods down into extracts, isolates, fortified elements. The results are impressive: A shake made up largely of whey protein; fortified white rice in place of brown; coconut oil with only medium-chain triglycerides (you might know it through its acronym, MCT).

But are we losing more than we gain, in these efforts to "improve" upon what Nature provides? This is not a new question. In the 12,000 years since the advent of settled farming, humans have selectively bred grains, vegetables and fruits to maximise yield or starch or sugar content. As we tinkered, yields rose and changed as we desired, but levels of vitamins, fibres, minerals and antioxidants declined. Compared to cultivated tomatoes, for instance, wild tomatoes have 30 times more lycopene. The wild potato has 20 times more antioxidants than our modern potato.

Meanwhile, scientists began to discover just how vital these nutrients were. Since the 1950s, researchers have isolated thousands of phytochemicals (flavonoids, anthocyanins, polyphenols, etc), often touted as superfoods in themselves. More work is underway.

Each time a new set of studies shows a correlation between a certain phytochemical (such as lycopene) and a significant health benefit (such as a lower incidence of cancers), there is a frenzy to isolate the element and bottle it.

Once again, it turns out that we are missing the big picture. Studies are now showing that some supplements, such as isolates of botanical compounds, though packed with the desired component, simply do not work as well as the whole fruit or vegetable. A study published in Nature in 2000 found that 100 gm of apple, which contains only 5.7 mg of Vitamin C, has the antioxidant activity of a 1500 mg Vitamin C pill.

How is this mathematically possible? One explanation is that the antioxidant activity is occurring due to some combinations of phytochemicals that we are yet to discover. Another theory is that phytochemicals work synergistically; they need the other elements present in the food item, in order to be most effective. Isolate them and they do not work as well. Isolate them and the human body cannot absorb them as well either, again as a result of the missing synergies between components.

Meanwhile, the race to break things down continues. For the food-processing industry, breaking down food and isolating nutrients makes ingredients easier to work with and increases shelf life. Refined oils, for instance, last much longer than unrefined ones. But it's important to remember that refined oils have been stripped of much of what made them good for humans in the first place: vitamins, tocopherols, polyphenols, etc (plus lots of complex flavour molecules).

My husband, a space geek, likes to joke that someday in the future, when humans are on their way to Mars, we'll all have to eat fake foods every day. I like to think that if we're going to Mars, we'll hopefully have figured out how to synthesise food better. Either way, we're not on our way to Mars right now. So just eat the apple or the orange or the tomato. We've done too much to them already.

(To reach Swetha Sivakumar with questions or feedback, email upgrademyfood@gmail.com)

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

BASAI
Biological Agri Solutions Association of India

Source HT 4.09.2022 Delhi Edition

4 firms booked for using subsidised urea

TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

RAIDS WERE CONDUCTED IN Y'NAGAR

Reports of samples collected during raids in Yamunanagar district proved that the bags bearing the label of technical grade urea contained agriculture grade urea.

YAMUNANAGAR, SEPTEMBER 3

The local police have registered two cases against four firms under the Fertiliser (Control) Order and Essential Commodity Act.

On the complaint of the officials of the Haryana Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare Department, Yamunanagar, a case was registered under Sections 3, 7, 10 of the Essential Commodities Act, and Sections 25, 28 of the Fertiliser (Control) Order at Sector 17 police station in Jagadhri; and under Section 420 of the IPC at city police station, Yamunanagar, on September 2.

In their complaints, Bal Mukand, Quality Control Inspector, and Satbir Singh, SDO, Agriculture Department, Yamunanagar, said a joint team of the Directorate of Fertiliser of the Government of India and Haryana Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare Department, Yamunanagar, raided a fertiliser godown of a firm in Jagadhri and at a fertiliser godown of another firm in Yamunanagar on August 27.

The team took three each samples from the bags of technical grade urea kept at both godowns. The samples were sent to the Central Fertiliser Laboratory in Faridabad, which confirmed the presence of neem oil contents in the samples. The reports proved that the bags bearing the label of technical grade urea contained agriculture grade urea.

Besides, a case was also registered against two more firms, which allegedly supplied the said consignment of technical grade urea to the firms in Yamunanagar.

One firm is based in UP, while the other is based in Gujarat. Sources in the department said instead of using technical grade urea to prepare glue, several plywood factories in Yamunanagar were using the subsidised one.

The rate the subsidised agriculture grade urea is Rs 266.50 per bag (45 kg bag), whereas the rate of the technical grade urea is more than Rs 2,000 per bag (50 kg bag).

Garden science dumbed down

SARIKA SHARMA

WHEN you bring to your home what has existed in the wild for millennia, the microenvironment becomes crucial. Gardening, as such, becomes a tightrope walk between various factors like sunlight, water and humidity. But how to achieve this balance? YouTube sensation Ekta Chaudhary's debut book 'Garden Up' handholds you and takes you through the basics of gardening, step by step.

The idea behind Ekta's book is not path-breaking and she knows it. What she's done is to put it all together for a purpose: to give readers a handy guide to most common plants in a home garden, but more importantly, to build an intuition about what is growing and why it is behaving the way it is.

Ekta began her career as a researcher studying ecology for 10 years but took to gardening full-time and launched her own venture, Garden Up, aimed at helping young Indians find greenery, sustainability and balance in their lives. She has today earned herself a good two lakh plus followers on YouTube. The reasons are simple: she knows her science and dumbs it down for the layman.

GARDEN UP
by Ekta Chaudhary.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 233.
₹299

The book begins with the basics — understanding the soil your plants are growing in by following a simple step like making a ball out of wet soil and shaping it into a cylinder. If you're not able to make a ball, it has more of sand in it. It the ball breaks when you try to shape it into a cylinder, then it has more silt, else there is more clay. More silt means water won't hold, more clay means your soil will hold more water than needed and while the upper layer on your pot might seem dry, it could actually be wet underneath! It is simple tips like these that make reading Ekta interesting.

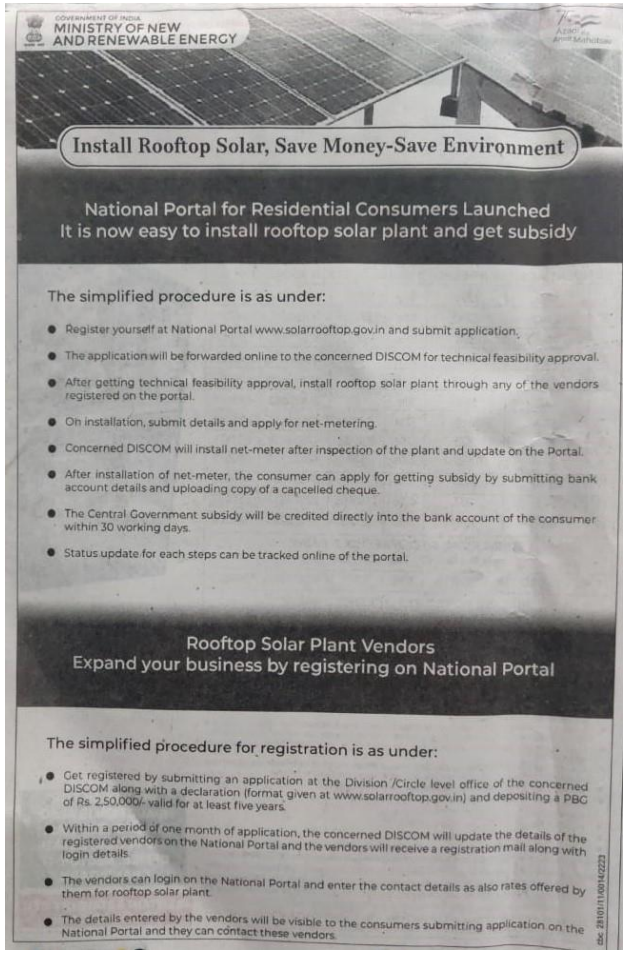
From maintaining indoor plants to common problems and solutions such as deadheading, proper watering — practical tips from Ekta make one realise that while we all may be planting the best in our garden, we may not be making an attempt at understanding what the plants are telling us.

One of the few drawbacks of the book is the lack of colour. Depicted through photos, it would have made for a holistic guidebook; 'Garden Up' makes use of illustrations and these do not always convey the intended. Also, almost every few pages, Ekta talks of mulching to retain moisture, but explains the concept only towards the end. 'Common problems of brinjal' doesn't include the most common problem of pests. What goes against the grain of the book is when she says that *giloy* grown on *neem* tree is believed to take on the medicinal values of *neem*. In a book that has 200 pages simplifying science of plants for readers, the word 'believed', somehow, doesn't fit. It would have been nice if she had backed this up with some research.

That aside, the 'super tips' on every plant are delightful and eye-opening. For instance, did you know that marigolds are great companion plants to be grown with cabbage, broccoli, tomatoes, potatoes and squash in a vegetable garden? Aimed at a new home gardener, the book will be helpful to even those at it for long.

BASAI

Biological Agri Solutions Association of India



Source T 4.09.2022 Delhi Edition