

Through The Fields Of The VADDAKKACHCHI FARM



Battling the hard earth

Battling the hard soiled earth and the harsh dry climate unique to Northern Sri Lanka, cultivation in Vaddakkachchi is by no means a smooth sail. Yet not a single plot of the massive 26-acre expanse of the farm was left out without being taken into use. Interesting and inspiring, our visit to the Vaddakkachchi Farm taught us the lesson of what can be earned through hard work.

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The thriving cultivations at the District Agricultural Training Centre, Vaddakkachchi was much more than what we expected to see in a cultivation in the dry zone, because everything from vegetables and fruits to medicinal plants were grown in the farm. And the entire farm's work was divided among just nine persons with around 20 seasonal labourers assisting them during harvesting seasons.

The almost unbearable heat of the high noon sun was no match for the will of the farmers who were busy preparing the soil and pruning the plants for the upcoming Yala season. Eager to explore, we proceeded further into the farm in the canopied shade of the path. Upon meeting Srirubhi, Assistant Farm Manager and her colleague Vadanna, Agriculture Instructor, who gladly agreed to show us around the farm, we set off to begin our excursion.

Our first stop was the section of fruits. On our either sides were mango and pineapple cultivations where pruned pineapple plants had been plated under mango trees. I saw this to be a fine method of space management given the unique characteristics of the pineapple plant to adapt to any environment—be it in full sun or dappled shade and rich or dry soil. Strolling at our own slow pace, all of us were all smiles because the refreshing breeze that blew across soothed us. Proceeding further into the fruits section, we came across avocado, grape vine, sweet orange, pomegranate, watermelon and rose apple cultivations—all in their

glory, awaiting the spring to produce their fruits.

The farmers who were busy engaged in their activities would stop and greet us with a smile as we walked pass them, reminding me of the friendly nature that is inherent to my country folk.

As we wended our way towards the vegetable plants section, Vadanna explained us that both organic and inorganic methods were used in cultivation. Neem leaves were grown surrounding tender capsicum plants as an organic pesticide to protect them from pests. According to Vadanna, this was a very effective method when compared to chemical pesticides. Brinjal, potatoes, beetroot and manioc were also among the vegetables planted at the Vaddakkachchi Farm.

Well adapted to the harsh conditions, the manioc cultivation was ready to produce its harvest and nurture the country folk. The massive well situated next to the manioc cultivation is the main source of water for the entire cultivation of the farm. I peered down to see my silhouetted reflection against that of the sky on the still water.

Vaddakkachchi Farm was full of life. And all around the farm, fields hued in different shades of emerald with little patches of red and purple scattered across, creating patterns much like designs printed on a fabric. Amidst these emerald fields, nestled in one corner of the farm was the green hut where the ornamental plants found their abode. Here, we saw a variety of plants such as bird's nest, anthurium, varieties of begonia, cactus, resina and papaya.

We could hear the playful chirping of birds that was a blissful disruption to the calming atmosphere. The long walk along the farm took me down memory lane back to when I used to roam around in the thickets of our village with my friends.

Guiding us along, Vadanna and Srirubhi took us to the mushroom cultivation, which was done in a specially constructed mushroom incubation room. The room, with a layer of sand on the floor was kept dark to retain coolness in order to provide a suitable atmosphere for the cultivation of mushrooms. Mushroom seeds are planted in a mixture made using sawdust, plaster of paris, calcium carbonate and magnesium sulphate. This mixture is then kept inside a polythene covering with an open mouth and placed inside the incubation room for mushrooms to grow.

We then arrived at the place where every plant is made to spend its first 20 to 25 days—the plant nursery. It is after the plants have matured enough that they are uprooted and planted in the relevant sections.

The plants in the section of medicinal plants had begun to spring up adding colour to the rustic environs. Being the supervisor for the section of medicinal plants in the farm, Vadanna was more than eager to show us this section as which bore the fruits of her hard work. Arrayed in neat lines, various indigenous medicinal plants such as sayamul, valadunkola, nawahandi, erandu, suwandathala, pihimbiya and even basil were planted in this section to be preserved.

Without even realising, we had come to the end of our excursion around the farm and it was time to take our leave. Still marvelled at their achievements and hard work, we bid adieu to Vadanna and Srirubhi. “Come again when we are yielding the harvest,” they said with smiles. And we set forth to return to the concrete jungle, capturing in our minds, a beautiful green panorama.

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