GOLDEN MAIZE

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The lush green cornfield. The farmer watches over his crops from the hut.

Village landscapes are poetic. Easily uplifting. And there’s nothing more beautiful than the view of perpetual mountain ranges embraced by fertile woodlands. Add cornfields to this vista and one sees continuity of a pictorial palette.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

In the scorching sun or in the gentle sunset, cornfields radiate a symmetry that is in contrast to the free-flowing landscape. The spec- tacular greenery of cornfields are rhythmical. Their vastness add a degree of profundity. But, beyond this vision is a narrative that revolves around people and livelihoods; of decades of hard work and

quiet contribution to the nation's food requirement. Nurtured by the village tank and the monsoons, and buttressed by abundant sunshine, this subsidiary food crop, is second only to the country's staple food – rice. Maize among locals has hardly been a staple; but among rural farming populations it has remained in demand, where it is consumed both on the cob and as flour and used in the food industry and for poultry feed.

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This trajectory however will change with 'Saubhagya' – the National Program on Harvesting and Cultivation launched in January 2020; an initiative to promote the cultivation and production of a dedicated number of food crops towards creating a self-sufficient nation and uplifting the nutrition level of the people. Maize is one among many selected under this Government-sponsored program. Moreover, this initiative will see fallow land cleared, prepared and used to cultivate the selected crops as a further boost to the program.

Cultivable throughout the country, except in southwest coastal districts, maize is largely grown in dry and intermediate zones such as in Anuradhapura, Ampara, Moneragala, Polonnaruwa, Badulla, Batticaloa and Hambantota districts– described as the 'maize belt', which account for over 80 percent of the land planted to maize in the country. It is rain-fed and cultivated in the lowlands, highlands and in chenas (shifting system of agriculture). Highland cultivation, which is totally dependent on rainfall is grown during the Maha cultivation season from November to March. Farmers in highland areas begin cultivating with the onset of rains. Whereas in lowlands, farmers depend primarily on the availability of water from major and minor irrigation systems and rainfall. The shifting system of cultivation or chenas are mostly used for maize cultivation,

where the farmers cultivate on cleared jungle land for two to three seasons before abandoning it. The pattern of cultivation in the chena is similar to those practiced in the highlands. Today, maize is grown in 900,000 hectares of land, producing 300,000 metric tons annually, which falls short of fulfilling the national annual demand of 400,000 metric tons.

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Local varieties of maize have existed for a long time. However, overtime, the origins of indigenous maize varieties may have been destroyed owing to mixing and inbreeding, but becaus the native varieties matured late and gave lower yields, the need for improvements was felt where the local lead agency, the Field Crops Research and Development Institute in Maha Iluppallama collaborated with inter- national agencies to develop efficient varieties of maize. Among the recommended maize varieties in Sri Lanka, the earliest, borne out of research were two open pollinated varieties; Badhra, recommended in 1979 has more orangey corn kernels, while Ruwan, recommended in 1992 is the more yellowy variety; both yield a harvest of four metric tons per hectare. As an impetus to the State initiative, germplasms obtained from the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center in Mexico developed five hybrid varieties that provide a higher yield. The hybrid varieties are pre- ferred by farmers because the plants, and the color and shape of the corn, and the height at which it buds are uniform across the plantation, while the flowers develop at the same time. The newer varieties produce a higher yield of 5.5-6.5 metric tons per hectare. And moreover, they have the ability to tolerate dry zone climatic condi- tions such as drought and dry weather.

Planted in rows or randomly, maize farming is hard work. But what makes it bearable is the community spirit that prevails in the field; of collective work, of familial affiliations that sees one through the arduous task of preparing the land for seed planting, followed by steadfast nurturing for more than 100 days, weeding, watering and fertilizing the field, until it is ready for harvesting. Once gathered, insect invasions and possible spoilage is prevented by drying the harvested corn in the sun. When cleared of the outer husk, the corn is dried further before a machine separates the kernels from the cob. The kernels are stored in sacks to be sold to local merchants or intermediaries who call over at the farmer’s house or at the market. The most widespread method of storing maize is in cob form in a barn or in the smoke of the kitchen fire strung from a wooden apparatus. Weaning the country away from its reliance on imported food by develop- ing the local agreconomy will, with consistency, help Sri Lanka regain its glory days as the Granary of the East

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Importantly, this green revolution will empower maize farmers and their com-
munities who have often been left bereft by the challenges from the su

r- rounding environment. Guarding their burgeoning crops from watch huts to keep wild animals and birds at bay has not been easy; while these animals could be driven out, the invasion of the sena caterpillar is like a double whammy on their livelihoods. B

ut with the State-sponsored impetus to promote healthy foods that have been in our food culture, maize farmers will be empowered through research and development initiatives, enhancedsystems of irrigation, markets and a fair price for their yield.

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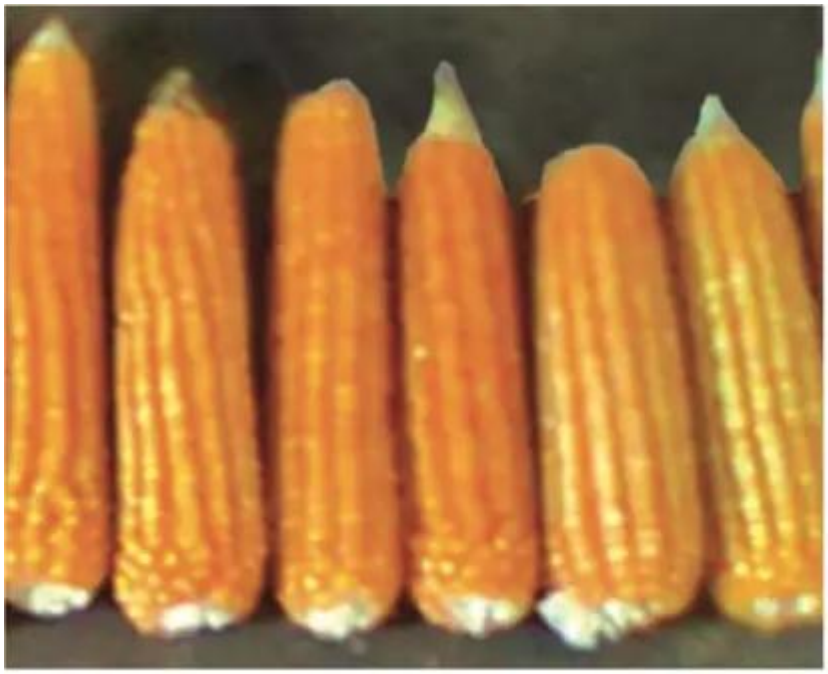








Bhadra



Ruwan



MI Maize HY 1



MI Maize HY 2



MI Maize HY 3



MI Maize HY 4



MI Maize HY 5