Treasure of the Island: The resilient ‘thal’ that graces the dry zones

Posted on



Exotic bio fencing made from dried palmyrah leaves

Words Daleena Samara ***Photographs*** Rasika Surasena

December brings respite to Sri Lanka’s arid North and East. Cooling sea breezes and occasional rains soothe and quench the parched earth. The sky, vast and overpoweringly blue, seems gentler, kinder. The thorny brown scrub jungle turn a friendlier, brighter green. The home of the graceful palmyrah palm heaves a sigh of relief.

But for the Asian Palmyrah (Borassus flabellifer) the rain is a luxury. This hardy plant, one of six species of the family Borassus that is widespread across the tropical regions of Africa, Asia and New Guinea, is a survivor, come drought or high-water. It asks for little to survive, and gives generously of itself in return. To Sri Lankans, the palm is a treasure.

Called thal locally, the Asian Palmyrah is on native ground in the country’s dry zone, in areas like Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara, Mannar and Puttalam. At least nine million of the 11 million palmyrah trees counted in Sri Lanka between 1997 and 2000 grew in the North and East, with the rest inhabiting southern areas like Hambantota.

The palms stand out in the distance as one enters these dusky regions. Their thick ridged trunks are tall sentinels across the horizon with blue green fronds waving like giant splayed hands high above ground. They live to a ripe old age of 120 years, reaching a height at 30m when full grown.

The palmyrah is a born survivor. At germination, the seed drops a tubular root 18 to 20 inches into the ground, penetrating the limestone for water. The saplings are so tenacious they survive even when goats and cows devour their early leaves – no mean feat because the palm starts life as a slow grower, sporting its first leaf a full year after germination and its second leaf six months later. The first flowers bloom in clusters when the palm is about 15 to 17 years old, usually between February and May, and slowly gives way to large purplish black coconut-shaped fruit.

The winds that brush against its leaves whisper secrets of the palm’s largesse. Man has found uses for every part of this palm and an entire industry has evolved around it in Sri Lanka, where the Palmyrah Development Board was set up in 1979, dedicated to the development of palmyrah products and the propagation of the palm. It is said that the palm has 800 uses, ranging from food to building materials, decorative and utility wares and writing materials.

In ancient times, scribes in Sri Lanka and India used the leaves of palmyrah and

talipot palms, to make a paper known as puskola (similar to papyrus), on which they recorded important historical and other information. Even today, thal leaves provide the puskola on which traditional horoscopes, astrological forecasts, made at the time of birth, are recorded.

The palmyrah cuisine is vast and varied, drawing on all parts of the plant to please the palate. Perhaps the best known product is palmyrah toddy, tapped from the inflorescence, sweet when fresh and bitter when fermented into the whisky-like arrack. Fresh toddy is boiled into a bitter sweet molasses, a more nutritious and healthy sugar substitute. It is also made into vinegar.

The clusters of purplish black nuts, about six inches in diameter, are full of sticky fibre surrounding small translucent jelly-like kernels, similar to that of the rambuttan and lychee. This juicy flesh is used to make delicious drinks. Travelling to Jaffna, you are often offered a drink of palmyrah straight from the fruit which is cut open so that you can suck the juice out of the flesh. Commercially, the fruit is made into delicious soft drinks and cordials.

Even the fibrous part of the fruit can be eaten when ripe, raw, boiled or roasted. The pulp is exported across the world to places like Canada, Germany, Australia, England, and France.

Palmyrah fruits are also used to make wonderful sweetmeats. The fruit pulp is made into kavum, a type of fried cake, and thal pinatu, a candy made of sheets of dry pulp sweetened with treacle. Thal hakuru (jaggery) is a dainty delicacy prepared by simmering sweet palm toddy into a syrup, which is poured into tiny baskets made of thal leaves called kuddan. The sugar is packed with nutrition and is a suitable sweetner in the preparation of various dishes.

The delicious and extremely nutritious snack, kotta kelangu, is prepared with palmyrah sprouts that have been left to germinate for about four months. The sprouts are cleaned, boiled and dried into the tough but popular snack. They are also peeled, split in two, sundried, pounded and sieved into a starchy flour that makes a nutritious gruel. Palmyrah flour is also prepared from the dried yam and used for making a variety of traditional dishes such as unleavened bread, pittu and laddu.

The hardy fibre is excellent for utility items like rope, brushes and brooms. Dried leaves are woven into a host of decorative homeware such as mats, baskets,

containers and even light furniture. The unopened fronds when treated are excellent for weaving. They are cut, dried and shred into strips to be woven into delightful utility items. The stem, which yields a sturdier fibre, is well suited to durable light furniture like small cabinets and stands.

The fibre connecting the branches to the tree trunk, called matta, is considered one of the strongest fibres in the world, and is used as a substitute for steel wire mesh to line tyres in Japan.

Palmyrah timber is heavy, hard and durable, and valued for construction, especially to make roofing beams and wharf pilings. During Sri Lanka’s 30-year war, now in the past, millions of trees were felled to build bunkers. As a result, the Palmyrah Development Board, which was operating at a profit in the 90s, suffered setbacks. Today, the Board has doubled efforts to boost the industry. Nurseries have been set up and steps have been taken to halt illegal felling. The palmyrah is now a protected species. The Board’s research centre has been revived and a number of research programmes have already been completed.

The Board has also initiated several training programmes to increase the weaver population in the North. Distilleries have also been established to assist with large-scale production and the network of retail outlets under the brand ‘Katpaham’ now stretches across the North and East and has a presence in Colombo.

According to the Board, demand for palmyrah products is greater than supply and so they are exploring ways to stimulate production. Orders come from around the world, especially from the West, for products ranging from tablemats to slippers.

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The virtues of the palmyrah palm are widely recognised across the world. In Asia, it is the state plant of Tamil Nadu in southern India, and symbol of the national flora of Cambodia, where the palms grace the main entrance of the venerated Angkor Wat. In Sri Lanka, the Tamil community that predominates the North and East refer to it as a heavenly palm, and believe that owning eight such palms is fortune enough to secure the future of a family. The generous and resilient palmyrah that gives so much of itself for so little in return is acknowledged as a treasure of the island.

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