

Plantain Cultivation in the Cauvery Valley.

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Plantain stands foremost among the "Muppazhams" or "the trio of the three Great Fruits of South India" viz., the Plantain, the Mango and the Jack. It is an important staple fruit obtainable in all seasons, at all places—whether in town or village—and by all people, whether rich or poor. It was well-known to the ancients and the use of "Pancha-Sakham" (or its five-fold form viz: the raw-fruit, the ripe fruit, the flower spike, the leaves and the inner stem) and the names of varieties grown at that time (such as, Mocha, Rambha, Kathali and Vamana (short) Kathali) were known in times so far back as the Vedic age.

Soils. Lands with good drainage facilities are selected, loams and clay loams being considered to be very well suited. Loams overlying a bed of kankar produce fully developed crops, while on sandy loams the trees grow tall but the bunches are small. Alkaline lands are improved by growing plantains. Fields which have been under betelvine are preferred as they are already enriched by copious manuring and do not therefore need a further application of manure for 2 years more.

Varieties. The chief varieties are Puvan and Rastali. Puvan is more largely grown than Rastali owing to its bearing bigger bunches and giving a heavier yield, but its chief defect lies in that it is not able to stand strong winds, as its stem is slender. A Puvan bunch generally contains 250 fruits, while a Rastali, which is a thin skinned sweet variety, bears smaller bunches with 100—150 fruits. Other common varieties are Bontha (*Monthan* or curry plantain), Pachai Nadan, Mada Vazhai, Sevvazhai and Thén-Kathali and Kuzhi Vazhai (Mauritius Plantain) and Puvillachindu. *Kuzhi vazhai* is planted between rows of Puvan or Rastali and is removed at the end of the first year. The last is a variety which is characterised by the absence of the infertile tip of the inflorescence when the fruits have formed and the flower bracts have fallen off.

Seasons. There are two main seasons—Margali pattam, (December—January) and Ani pattam (June—July). The former is preferred as the crop obtained during this period fetches a higher price: but this necessitates propping up of stems during the windy months of April and May, if the variety is *Puvan*. Rastali has a thicker stem and needs no propping.

The suckers are also planted during September—October,—the Arpasi pattam, but not much planting is attempted during this season as the market becomes glutted and the prices are low at this time.

Cultivation. Suckers from a plantain 2—3 years old are selected and planted 8' apart both ways. Trenches are dug later on and are deepened in the 3rd month. Later, from the 4th month onwards leaf sheaths are tied and side suckers removed, and trenches cleaned. The bunches if they appear in the hot weather are covered over with the shot blade leaf. They become fully ripe in 3 months. The plantain crop receives well rotted farmyard manure at 6 Madras measures per tree. *Ratoons* get a root-pruning and a second application of manure.

Village earth and sand are mixed together and applied if the soil is stiff clay. To enrich plantain land it is not uncommon to apply large quantities of wild indigo to the previous paddy crop. Groundnut cake at 1500 lbs. an acre is a favourite manure in Erode, Karur and Namakal Taluks. Other cakes in use are Margosa cake, and Castor cake. Tannery refuse is common in Trichy, while pig dung is also favoured. According to the general rotation plantain follows 2 crops of paddy and occupies the ground for 2 years.

For one month after planting, the field is watered once a week, and later on once in 20 days. It is better to have heavy waterings at long intervals rather than frequent irrigation. The crop is sold to local merchants who transport them to different markets. The market price is dependent on the season. It is moderate from January to May and rises thence till September—October after which prices go down.

*Diseases :**Surai (Bud rot) Disease.*

This is a common disease and the following are the signs of the presence of the disease: (1) Profuse suckering (2) Stem, leaf, petioles and leafsheaths get roughened and 'hard' to the sickle (3) Stunted growth : and abnormally crowded leaf-sheaths (4) The leaves put forth are short and occasionally brown. The central leaf then rots and disappears and a hollow is formed.

This disease does great damage in rich soils ; heavy manuring is supposed to aggravate it. Rastali and Kuzhi Vazhai are more liable to it than Puvan.

Vithai-kai disease. Confined to Puvan : symptoms are that fruits become slender and malformed and seeds are developed inside to a greater or less extent and the produce is worthless for purposes of sale. The attack is greater in ratoons.

Chodai disease. Confined to Pachai Nadan. Symptoms—affected fruits do not develop, are thin and flat and the inside is hollow.

Other minor diseases are tip rot of Bonthan, cracking of fruits in Rastali and Kuli Vazhai. "Kallakai" is a disease whereby the fruits in a bunch mature at irregular periods.

Improvements.

The Plantain industry can be improved along the following lines :

1. Introduction of better varieties and improved methods of cultivation.
2. Methods of preservation of fruits.
3. The utilisation of the Plantain fibre.
4. Methods of preparation of plantain flour.
5. A study of the diseases of the Plantain with special reference to remedies.

[This crop occupies about 1,00,000 acres in this Presidency and vies with sugarcane for close attention on the part of the ryot. It would therefore be a matter of no small concern if it is neglected. Sugarcane area was 1,39,000 acres in 1921—22. *Editor.*]