

THE TIMES OF INDIA

INCLUDES 6 PAGES OF BANGALORE TIMES

The woman who rejuvenated sandalwood trees in S India

RA Srimathi Brought 79 Saplings From Elsewhere In The Country

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Supporting a big bindi and an ordinary sari, hers is an aura hard to miss. Sandalwood researcher RA Srimathi's relentless service is deeply rooted, literally.

Srimathi brought 79 'outstanding' sandalwood saplings from different parts of the country for planting in Peninsular India, the natural habitat for these fragrant woods. That was also the time when spike disease threatened the abundantly thriving sandalwood trees, resulting in a huge loss of this precious species. Srimathi's endeavour was responsible for a turnaround in the fortunes of sandalwood plantations in the region.

"We were looking to augment tree plantation and travelled all over the country - from Kangra Valley in Himachal Pradesh, to Rajasthan and Parasnath Hill in the then Bihar to get quality sandalwood trees. We selected 79 trees and planted them along the Deccan Plateau. This drive increased the Sandalwood tree count in South India," recalls 83-year-old Srimathi.

Sandalwood tree twigs brought from other states were grafted with the saplings to get a good generation of trees. There was a huge nursery at Hoskote where grafting happened. The grafted twigs were put in the clonal banks and the rest were sent to clonal seed orchards.

"The clonal seed orchards were spread across Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. After successful grafting, we allowed them to pollinate the natural way," says HD Kulkarni, Srimathi's junior in the project. "We were looking at improving the quality of seeds dramatically and managed to achieve just that. For the next decade



SPECIAL BOND: Srimathi has had a lasting relationship with these precious trees

things were very good and the number of Sandalwood trees surged. No one took it up in as massive a way as Srimathi did," says Kulkarni.

Looking back: Born on May 4, 1930 in Mysore, Srimathi started her career in 1959 as an UGC research fellow in Central College, Bangalore. She then joined as a research assistant in Forest Research Laboratory, Bangalore (a unit of FRI, Dehradun and the present-day Institute of Wood Science and Technology) in 1960, and went

ON HER MIND

The gradual dip in sandalwood production in the recent years worries this green warrior. Had it been during her time, she would have traveled all over and taken necessary steps to successfully intervene. "Good quality sandalwood produced in bulk was always our pride. But today, so many threats loom large. Besides disease, smuggling and government policies need to be dealt with," she rues.

on to become a senior research officer (special grade).

Eventually, when the Sandalwood Research Centre was established in Bangalore in 1977, Srimathi was appointed the head of the department of genetics and tree breeding. During her tenure there, she notably contributed to propagate this prized species of wood.

Her unique contribution was the chemical control of spike disease through infusion (grafting) techniques. Her search for spike disease resistant trees took her to the nook and corner of North India where she found the 79 'outstanding trees'. Her most successful project, perhaps, was the first sandalwood clonal seed orchard established in Nallal, Hoskote, Bangalore.

Srimathi retired in 1988 but continued to keep her scientific quest alive, this time as a forest consultant promoting plantation of teak and sandalwood in the country.

Look at her energy and you know age is merely a number for this octogenarian. "At present, I'm collecting information on various species of trees which yield aromatic oils and are used to make perfumes and medicines," she says. And no sooner she collects the details, she'll start penning her debut book.

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