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CHOLA; NEW ORGANIC SHOP
EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

HERITAGE OF FRAGRANCE
& FLAVOURS

Special Article

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In 2024, Agroecology took center stage as we successfully trained around 40 agriculture graduates in natural farming as part of our project, introducing them to chemical-free practices. This rewarding experience fuels our commitment to reaching more farmers interested in natural farming and guiding them in its implementation. Our ongoing partnership with the indigenous communities in Ranni and Kulathupuzha remains steadfast as we explore solutions to mitigate wild animal intrusion and protect their crops. As we step into the new year, we are eager to embrace new projects and partnerships that expand our reach and enhance lives in meaningful ways. With clean air becoming a growing concern, we're dedicated to contributing to projects that address this issue, staying true to our mission of people, planet, and sustainability.



On 21st December 2024, a group of 34 youth volunteers from the Nehru Yuva Kendra, led by their head, visited the Panavally Thal Agroecology Centre. The field visit aimed to provide the participants with an opportunity to explore the principles of agroecology, enhance their understanding of rice diversity, and foster awareness about sustainable agricultural practices. The volunteers visited the rice diversity unit, where they learned about various indigenous rice varieties and actively engaged with the office team to clear their doubts about rice cultivation, growth patterns, and the significance of preserving rice diversity. Many participants, from districts across Kerala with limited exposure to farming practices, found the interactive sessions insightful, gaining a deeper understanding of agriculture's role in sustaining communities and ecosystems. The visit concluded with a meal featuring traditional cuisine. Overall, the volunteers found the experience refreshing, educational, and an excellent opportunity to connect with nature while learning practical sustainability concepts.



Traditional Scented Rice Varieties of Kerala: A Heritage of Fragrance & Flavour

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Have you been to a paddy field? Have you ever observed the simple yet profound rhythm of nature, where each plant and every breeze seems to have its own story? Here I am sharing my unique experience while walking through the paddy fields in Thanal's Agroecology Center Panavally, Wayanad. One could see the lush green paddy fields with the rice plants standing tall in neat rows with their vibrant green stalks swayed in the gentle breeze blended with the distant calls of birds, creating a soothing natural symphony. The ground beneath my feet felt damp yet firm, a reminder of the early morning dew that still clung to the soil. I paused for a moment to take it all in the endless stretch of the field, the sun beginning to rise higher, casting a golden glow across the landscape. The sight of the water reflecting the sky added a sense of calm, as if time itself had slowed down. My thoughts seemed to align with the rhythm of nature, as if the world's noise had faded, and only the simplicity of life remained. It was a reminder of the quiet strength of nature, and how it sustains us in ways we often overlook.

Kerala was once rich with traditional rice varieties that grow in various agro-climatic conditions of the State. According to Kerala State Biodiversity Board, more than 2000 traditional rice varieties including scented and medicinal varieties contribute much variation to our bowl of rice diversity. The Malayalam proverb '*Rice is Life*' itself reflects the importance of rice as a primary food source for Keralites.

The main features of traditional agriculture include unique planting techniques, crop upkeep, input application, post-harvest procedures, and folk art that is connected to and timed with farming activities. Rice varieties like Mullankazhama, Jeerakasala, Gandhasala, the indigenous scented varieties, once popularly cultivated in the Wayanad district of Kerala, vanished from the scene as times changed. But now, they are again coming back to a small extent in selected pockets in the state, subsequent to promotion efforts by governmental and non-governmental agencies (Ahaljith, R.,2019).

More than merely ingredients, Kerala's scented rice varieties are a part of a rich cultural legacy that has been handed down through the ages. The state's distinctive ecology, which includes wetlands, undulating hills, and tropical rainforests, has fostered these varieties with care.

Among the scented rice crops of Wayanad, The most famous is the fragrant variety *Gandhashala*. *Gandhashala* is cultivated in Wayanad, Mala Nadu regions of Karnataka and Mysore plateau. This rice often gives off a fragrant aroma when cooked and is used to prepare *ghee rice*, *biriyani*, *upma*, *payasam* and *malar*.

Mullan kazhama is the aromatic rice variety of Wayanad. *Mullan kazhama* differs from *Gandhasala* due to its round grain and the presence of long stalks. The rice grains are straw colored. The color of rice is white and all other characteristics and uses are similar to *Gandhashala*. This is used to prepare *Upma*, *Ghee rice*, *Payasam*, *Puttupodi*, *Idiyappam podi* etc.

Jeerakashala is another rice that belongs to the category of aromatic rice. It got its name because its rice grains are thin and long like cumin seeds. Less fragrant than *Gandhasala* and *Mullan kazhama*. The rice grains are straw colored. The color of the rice is white. It is mostly used for *Ghee rice* and *upma*.

The growing popularity of high-yield, hybrid rice varieties and the changing climate have made it difficult to cultivate traditional fragrant rice varieties in Kerala in recent years. Nonetheless, there is a growing movement to preserve and revitalize these heritage cultivars. Through organic farming practices, community-based rice conservation initiatives, and awareness campaigns, local farmers and sustainable agriculture organizations are attempting to encourage the production of traditional rice varieties. The government of Kerala has also taken action to encourage the production of native rice varieties by giving farmers financial incentives and technical assistance. In addition to protecting Kerala's unique culinary tradition, this is regarded as a crucial endeavor to guarantee food sustainability and security for coming generations.



Gandhashala



Mullan Kazhama



Jeerakashala

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Green Army Explores Composting at Thanal

On December 27, 2024, Green Army International volunteers and coordinators explored the different types of composting at Thanal's Compost Park in Kowdiar. They learned about various composting methods –pot compost, Kamba compost, bin compost, kitchen bin composting, and Thumboormuzhi—at both household and community levels.



Ms. Manju S, Health and Hygiene Supervisor at Thanal, shared insights on the composting process, its benefits, and waste management practices followed in the Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation. Mr. Jayakumar C, Executive Director of Thanal, explained in the ensuing

session, the science behind composting and the challenges posed by different climatic conditions.

The young volunteers participated actively, asking questions and gaining valuable knowledge on sustainable waste management and its real-world applications.

Empowering Women Farmers with Sustainable Agroecology Practices

As part of Pesticide Action Network India's commitment to promoting agroecology and reducing pesticide use, a workshop was held in Cherpu Panchayat, Thrissur, to empower women farmers, Kudumbashree members, and local farmers.

The workshop focused on equipping participants with practical skills in preparing bio-inputs and implementing organic pest and disease management techniques. Demonstrations were conducted on



the preparation of Jeevamruth, fish amino acids, egg amino acids, enriched Trichoderma, and Pseudomonas.

The sessions were expertly led by Mr Bharath and Ms Athira from Thanal's Agroecology Team, fostering hands-on learning and sustainable farming practices.

Empowering Women through Leadership: *My Experience at the Irene Fernandez Training*

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Program Officer, Thanal



I had the privilege of attending a transformative three-day Irene Fernandez Women Leadership Training Programme by PAN Asia Pacific in Penang, Malaysia. My colleague, Ms. Aswathy, also joined me. This three-day event brought together an inspiring group of participants, including farmers, migrant workers, women welfare advocates, and activists from six different countries- Laos, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Bangladesh and India.

The training commenced with an inspiring introduction to Irene Fernandez, a renowned Malaysian women politician who dedicated her life in advancing human rights and women leadership movements. Her story set the tone for a programme focused on women's empowerment and leadership.

The sessions were rich in learning and discussion, starting with "The Politics of Pesticides," where we explored the complex intersection of agriculture, health, and politics. We also delved into the 'Impact of Globalization and Colonialism' on women's lives, discussing how these forces shape their opportunities and struggles. Each session was followed by engaging activities and games, which allowed us to connect and reflect on the topics in a hands-on way.

One of the most memorable sessions was the 'River of Life.' In this activity, participants shared two of their happiest and saddest life experiences. It helped us see life as a river—facing obstacles like rocks and debris but flowing onward, shaping its path. The message was clear: challenges teach us resilience, and life's journey continues, leading to greater possibilities, like a river merging into the sea. The programme not only deepened our understanding of global issues affecting women but also fostered meaningful connections with women from diverse backgrounds. It was a powerful reminder of the strength in solidarity and the shared vision of creating a better future for women worldwide.

I left Penang inspired and equipped with new tools and ideas to contribute to the movement for women's empowerment and leadership in my own community and for the women farmers I am working with.

Chola: New Organic Store Opens in Thrissur

On December 9, 2024, Thanal Agroecology Producer Company proudly inaugurated Chola, The Organic Store in Thrissur. The event was graced by Smt. Ambili Soman, President of Kodakara Panchayat, who officially opened the store.

Sri Raju and Smt. Usha, Directors of Thanal Agroecology Producer Company, shared inspiring words during the occasion, highlighting the importance of organic farming and sustainable consumer choices. The event saw enthusiastic participation from organic farmers, consumers, and well-wishers, making it a memorable milestone for the agroecology community.

Accolades

We are proud to announce that Ms. Usha S, Thanal's co-founder, has received the Nandri Award from the Anantha Foundation for her exceptional contributions to organic farming.

A passionate advocate for ecological agriculture, Ms. Usha has led campaigns on pesticide elimination, native seed conservation, GMO-free food, and sustainable farming practices. She is a member of the India Advisory Board of the Bharat Agroecology Fund and serves on the Steering Committees of ASHA and MAKAM, promoting sustainable agriculture and women's rights in farming. Currently, she is the Director of Thanal Agroecology Producer Company, continuing her inspiring work in organic and ecological farming.



Your donation, no matter how small, shall make a difference towards a greener, more equitable future. Thank you for considering our cause. Together, let's create a planet where environmental health and justice prevail..

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