

# IDRC

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# FEATURE

*A monthly features service on scientific, technical, and educational subjects pertinent to development.*

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## SRI LANKA DOMESTICATES ITS MEDICINAL PLANTS

by NIMAL FERNANDO

After decades of neglect, Ayurveda, a traditional form of medicine, is being revived in Sri Lanka. In the forefront of this revival is the Ayurvedic Research Institute which has been given generous grants by the government.

Scientists and research officers at the Institute, located at Navinna, a suburb a few miles south of the capital city, Colombo, are now working closely with officials from the Departments of Agriculture and Forestry to expand and streamline the current program of medicinal plant cultivation around the country. This program is now their main concern as the properties and efficacy of nearly all indigenous herbs are known. Thus, in consultation with agriculture and forestry experts, the Institute's staff has determined the best elevation and soil conditions for growing the various varieties of herbs.

A proud claim of Sri Lanka's ayurvedic physicians is that only a handful of Sri Lanka's 2, 850 plant species are bereft of medicinal properties. According to a survey conducted by the Forest Department, approximately 18, 000 acres of the island's forested area contain abundant supplies of medicinal plants. The Department is paying special attention to the herbs found in the famous forest reserves of Uva and Sabaragamuva provinces, in the central region of the country.

Beyond the medical importance of the island-wide effort to propagate these medicinal plants are the employment benefits. Rural people will be drawn in an organized system of herb collection. It has in fact been found that the rural inhabitants can readily identify some of the lesser known plants that grow in their area. A plan initiated by the Ministry of Health enables the Ayurvedic Drugs Corporation to conduct a program whereby local producers register themselves as large-scale suppliers of plants from their respective areas. This scheme is expected to lead them eventually into a profitable profession as herb collectors.

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The value of developing the local production of herbs has also been greatly highlighted by the fact that the plants and herbs growing in a patient's natural environment have been proved to be more effective in treatment than those from a different country, climate or environment. The Ayurvedic Medical Council and the Department of Agriculture are therefore jointly supplying ayurvedic herbs for cultivation on the grounds of the government ayurvedic hospitals. Scientists of the Department of Agriculture have selected areas in the Sinjaraja forest in the south, the Pidurutalagala mountain range in the central hills and the forests at Amparai in the north from where herbs and seedlings will be supplied to hospitals and dispensaries.

Worried that unplanned clearing of forests for village expansion and agriculture could result in mass destruction of these plants, the Ayurvedic Research Institute has also recommended to the Forest Department that areas where numerous medicinal plants thrive -- village forests, stream and wildlife reserves -- be declared protected reserves. Traditional herbaria in the central province are already so protected.

The government is also interested in the present drive to expand the cultivation of these plants since it will mean a saving of the foreign exchange now being spent on imports from India to supplement local production. The total cost of raw herbs for ayurvedic drug manufacture last year exceeded 15 million rupees (approximately \$1.83 million US). A growing export market also exists in the developed countries because pharmaceutical research is increasing the demand for medicinal plants from countries such as Sri Lanka and India.

Although institutes like the Ayurvedic Drugs Corporation and the Ayurvedic Medical Council are more interested in the short-term species to ensure a steady supply for daily domestic use, the Department of Agriculture, the Forest Department and the Ayurvedic Research Institute itself emphasize the propagation of long-term species such as Sandalwood, Belli, Gammalu, Midi and Godokanduru which take from 20 to 30 years to yield substantial returns.

Dr. H.I. Chandrasekera, Assistant Director of the Ayurvedic Research Institute, agrees with the general view that only large departments like the Agriculture and Forest Departments can handle the intensive cultivation of these medicinal plants. According to him, a large export market exists for some medicinal plants -- *Rauwolfia Serpentina* (Ekaveriya), *Nux Vomica* (Goda Kanduru), *Croton Tigliumor* (Jayapala) and *Hydrocotyle Asiatica* (Gotukola).

The Ayurvedic Drugs Corporation is not however interested in collecting these plants and herbs in giant quantities to meet export orders. Its aim is to meet local demand and so eliminate the need for imports from India.

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