

KERALA

Sheemakonna, once a common tree, is back in the spotlight in Kerala

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THIRUVANANTHAPURAM JULY 28, 2022 18:01 IST

UPDATED: JULY 28, 2022 18:01 IST

Gliricidia sepium has a reputation for being a rich source of green leaf manure



After a long gap, the focus appears to be back on the humble Sheemakonna, once a common sight across rural Kerala.

The medium-sized tree, which has a reputation for being a rich source of green leaf manure despite bearing the tag of invasive species, is in the news again, courtesy its old patron: the State Agriculture department. The department is reviving the practice of planting

Sheemakonna (*Gliricidia sepium*) in a campaign mode in a bid to promote green leaf manuring for various crops. The idea: natural is best.

Gliricidia cuttings will be distributed for planting this year as part of the proposed Kera Raksha Vaaram (coconut protection week) observance. For this campaign, 50 lakh *Gliricidia* cuttings will be arranged by Krishi Bhavans for distribution.

Fast-growing, moderately tall shrubs or trees with thick foliage are suited for green leaf manure. In Kerala, *Gliricidia sepium* is considered the ideal candidate. Often found as living fences, the Sheemakonna can provide 5 kg to 10 kg of green leaves annually.

"The programme aims at propagating the idea of in situ green leaf manuring. *Gliricidia* leaves are rich in plant nutrients such as nitrogen (2.76%), phosphorus (0.28%) and potassium (4.60%)," a concept note by the Agriculture department said.

Old records reveal that Gliricidia Week and Gliricidia Month celebrations had become a fairly common practice in Kerala from the time of the first Communist ministry, notes Minister for Agriculture P. Prasad.

"Back then, Sheemakonna planting was encouraged by the government to compensate for the shortage of chemical fertilizers. Today, such methods for guaranteeing essential nutrients to crops have become important when we are faced with the harmful effects of pesticides," said Mr. Prasad.

Reportedly, the first such campaign, a week-long one, was held in 1958. The following year, it was scaled up into a month-long campaign.

"*Gliricidia* is now synonymous with green leaf manure. It is now a common sight to see *Gliricidia* being planted in large numbers in and around compounds for manure," the late R. Heli, agriculture expert and a former Director of Agriculture, observed in the May 1961 issue of *Kerala Karshakan*, the publication of the State Farm Information Bureau.

Interest in Sheemakonna seems to have faded in the later decades, possibly due to the ready supply of other fertilizers.

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