

## **Our food – our environment, our future: a 3 year farming outreach initiative.**

### **Project Summary**

Recent headlines describe India's farming as "fields of despair".

Agriculture is the primary source of income for the majority of families in the Nilgiris. But poor land management, over-use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has led to contaminated soil and water courses, and vegetables and fruits have significant traces and residues of all of this. A few years back now I remember being told by the village elders in Kerada village that there has been a massive increase in the incidence of breast cancer which they had put down to the weedkiller 'Round-Up' getting into their local sources of water. There is clearly an urgent need for introducing alternative sustainable techniques in Nilgiris.

The Organic Awareness Centres (OAC's) of the Garden of Hope project of NAWA focus on organic and biodynamic farming, and environmental issues. This project helps communities, farmers and growers understand consequential food issues and challenges.

The communities have to help themselves and create sustainable environments by harnessing those who are convinced and utilizing them as positive agents for sustainable organic development. Our programme, which is replicable, establishes around 15-20 OAC's over the course of 3 years. During 2015, 9 OAC's had been established and or farmers selected. At the Resource nursery and on site at the OAC, training included slope management, raised bed techniques, crop rotation, provision of BD inputs, alternative waste management, recycling, soil restoration and community based alternative income streams such as growing medicinal herbs.

A detailed baseline survey of each village and area is completed when the farmer-growers have been 'signed up'. To help encourage co-operation of the selected growers, a stipend will be paid over the first year of the project - this compensates the grower for any lost income whilst the piece of land is converted to organics.



Training at Thambatty: Ms Pushpa demonstrating how to make Jeevamritham to a group of 23 Kurumba tribal women from Manjoor who attended a Dept of Horticulture programme titled 'organic farming for beginners'. Pushpa had a terrific connection with this group and at the end of the day's training exchanged telephone numbers with many of the women.

The specific objectives of the project are to:-

- Improve knowledge, skill levels and methodologies among rural farming communities,
- Demonstrate use and value of panchagavya, CPP, BD preparations, jeevamritham, pest repellents, bio-dynamic and vermi-compost,
- Exchange of information and documentation of activities,
- Help farmers to optimize yield and net sales value from their smallholding,
- Facilitate the concept of environmental citizenship through shared knowledge and sense of responsibility.
- Each OAC farmer/grower to have delegated responsibility to help growers change to biodynamic production with a target of up to 20 organic smallholdings in his/her village.
- Each OAC farmer/grower has to encourage village women to establish kitchen nutritional gardens.
- Continuous training during initial 12 month period, and on-site support

- R&D... soil analysis, laboratory testing of nutrition content of vegetables and comparing yield, sales value and nutrition content to vegetables grown with fertilizers.
- Improved nutrition and well-being of village community
- maintain cultural traditions.
- involve the school eco-clubs.



BD compost making at the Thambatty resource nursery. Cow dung slurry is added together with BD507, Velerian



The photograph above is of Philomena's land at Gudalor. Philomena is a widow (see photo below) with a 1.5 acre small-holding. Philomena lost her husband some years ago and has been struggling to bring up her family ever since, faced with a burden of debt like so many widows in India. Because of her poor health she has been unable to cultivate her land for several years. We are helping her to restore her land as one of the OAC's and YAM will be one of the anchor crops to be grown. Her small-holding will be an ideal showcase for organic cultivation



Sunil Ranjith's OAC signage at Koderi village



Below, Sunil Ranjith preparing Jeevamritham for his cauliflower and chow chow



Sunil is a progressive young grower with two acres of land and agreed to create an OAC last year on half an acre, planting chow chow as his primary crop and inter-cropping with cauliflower and celery. Sunil ran into problems when the cauliflower plants were damaged by black-cut worms. After spending a whole day with him our project manager, Sivakumar, decided to cover the stems of the damaged cauliflower plant with a 'sleeve'. The plants recovered and Sunil managed to harvest a good crop as you can see from the photographs above and below





The photograph above is of Sunil and Sivakumar our programme manager proudly showing off the fruits of labour!

Below – CPP preparation,



Below - collecting soil samples for laboratory testing



### **Supply chain for marketing and selling vegetables**

Growers repeatedly ask us for help in selling their produce. Our plan is to establish a supply chain so that the grower can sell directly to the buyer – both wholesaler and retailer. One of the trustees of the GoHT is looking at establishing the supply chain concept in the ensuing year.