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Reintroduce rural wild vegetables to urban food basket

Bringing back healthy diets in the form of local, seasonal, inclusive, and biodiverse produce also ensures the food security of the region.

 **DHNS**

Last Updated 02 January 2024, 02:32 IST

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Representative image of vegetables. Credit: Pixabay Photo

Harisha R P and Namratha Murali

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commercialisation of our food systems.

the indigenous communities, the younger generation is quickly losing the traditional knowledge of these species in the forests and agricultural systems they inhabit, many turning to non-agriculture and quarries for their livelihoods.

The term 'Wild Food Plants' may sound new to us, now forgotten, but most have grown up with them as a way of life. Unfortunately, countless varieties of wild food plants have already gone extinct, abandoned by farmers in favour of more productive varieties that became available with the ushering in of the green revolution. The local wild greens, tubers, and berries, which our forefathers foraged from forests, farmlands, and kitchen gardens are difficult, if not impossible, to be substituted by the blueberries or apples flown in to the markets from halfway across the world.

Bringing back healthy diets in the form of local, seasonal, inclusive, and biodiverse produce also ensures the food security of the region.

The growing trend of urban agriculture, terrace gardening, and the increased interest in foraging have the scope to increase the availability of these products in urban areas. In line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the development of the wild food plant sector in India has the potential to contribute to multiple SDGs, including SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). Wild food plants are a unique and underutilised resource that holds tremendous potential for sustainable innovation and entrepreneurship.

With increasing consumer demand for wild food plants, the prospects for innovation and entrepreneurship in this sector are growing. It also stimulates the creation of new economic opportunities for small-scale producers and start-ups. It could potentially help with conservation of wild plant species, and the improvement of urban food security and nutritional security.

Food security doesn't guarantee nutritional security. Even though the current global food system can provide food for humankind, the problem of malnutrition persists. Easy access to highly processed and fast food in urban scenarios poses more significant health risks in the name of convenience. With growing awareness among urban consumers who are constantly on the lookout to try new consumables that promise better health and well-being, access to wild foods would be a true blessing. It could prove to be a solution for many ailments, aiding in getting nutritive elements locally instead of globally produced food that is alien to our gut system.

By raising awareness about this rich heritage, perhaps the traditional knowledge could empower the indigenous communities and rural people to share and preserve it before it is lost forever. Creating awareness of Wild Food Plants through events and incorporating them into the school curriculum is necessary. These campaigns should target urban consumers, and other stakeholders, including farmers, policymakers, and entrepreneurs, to increase understanding of their benefits. This can include promoting the nutritional value of these plants, highlighting the cultural significance of traditional food practices, and encouraging their use in daily diets.

(Harisha is a Post Doctoral Fellow and project manager and Namratha Murali is communication associate, ATREE, Bengaluru)

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(Published 02 January 2024, 02:32 IST)

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