

Rising demand for chemical-free produce, farmers encouraged to adopt new practice

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In view of rising demand for chemical-free fruits and vegetables in the local markets, farmers' groups in and around Pune are encouraging cultivators to adopt such practices of production.

Tushar Agarwal, the director of Swami Samarth Farmer Producer Company, that runs 20 weekly farmers' markets in Pune and Mumbai said they are making efforts to push for agricultural practices to meet the increased demand from urban customers.

Producing fruits and vegetables without using chemicals or with minimum chemicals is a shift from the traditional methods of agriculture. Instead of urea and other chemical fertilisers, chemical-free methods entail the use of natural ingredients and special bacterial culture. Although such practices have similarities with organic method of production, such a certification can only be obtained after three years of non-chemical practices on the field.

Agarwal said they had introduced the concept last year to test customer reaction. "Produce grown in this manner turned out to be a hit with the customers immediately. So, we decided to encourage more and more farmers' groups to go for this method of agriculture," he said. This year, five to six farmers' groups have adopted the method.

While customers have lapped up such produce, the agricultural practice, Agarwal said, was beneficial at the farmers' end as well. He said farmers have reported higher rates of success with the seeds and better produce. "The company itself has taken on rent five acres of land in Shirur taluka of Pune to grow eight different types of vegetables to cater to the markets," Agarwal said. Almost 10 per cent of the produce being sold in the markets, he claimed, were chemical free. The company has also taken the dealership of a Karnataka-based company that provides organic inputs.

At the weekly markets, groups that practice chemical-free farming have been given banners depicting the whole process through photographs.

Contrary to popular belief, Agarwal said, the chemical-free produces do not command higher prices. "The cost of production is not exorbitant so, the customer is also not pinched hard," he said. But given the better acceptability of the produce, the farmers have reported more sales, he said. Agarwal added that the produce sells faster than the normal ones and farmers have been reporting lesser losses.

The farmers' weekly market concept was started a few years ago to help farmers bypass the middlemen in the system. Farmers' groups congregate in designated places to sell their produce with the Maharashtra State Agriculture Marketing Board (MSAMB) facilitating availability of space for them.

Agarwal said the groups are running 20 such markets in Pune and Mumbai and the response from the customers' end is very good.

Rahul Pawar, a resident of Aundh, said he has started buying organic or chemical-free produce after he understood their benefits. "Such products are healthier," he said

On an average, around 80 tonnes of various commodities are sold in the farmers' markets in and around Pune daily.