

Jatropha harmful for kids, soil and aquatic life: scientist

The jatropha plant, a rich source of bio-fuel that is being grown on a large scale in Chhattisgarh, can harm the soil and aquatic life, cause skin cancer and even affect the brain of children if accidentally consumed, claims a scientist.

'Researchers found in 1987 itself that jatropha oil contains tumour-promoting substances,' Pankaj Oudhia, a Raipur-based agricultural scientist, told IANS.

'People across the world know that jatropha oil is harmful for the skin. This is the reason why it is also known as 'Hell oil',' said Oudhia, who has done extensive research on jatropha.

'Unfortunately, jatropha seeds are liked by children and cases of accidental feeding have been reported from several countries. In the past few months, hundreds of cases have been reported from different parts of India. In Meerut (in Uttar Pradesh), over 50 children were recently hospitalised due to jatropha poisoning,' the scientist said.

'The ongoing large-scale jatropha plantation is becoming a curse for rural children. Two of its seeds are like a strong purgative. Four to five seeds can cause death,' warned Oudhia, who is also affiliated to the Medicinal Plant Working Group, North America.

Jatropha is considered a wonder plant that produces seeds with an oil content of 37 percent. The oil can be combusted as fuel without being refined. Experts say jatropha is a hardy plant, which can also be grown in wastelands.

Several Indian states have been cultivating jatropha on a mass-scale to extract bio-diesel to replace high cost fossil fuel. Chhattisgarh has planted about 400 million saplings in wastelands over the last couple of years, said S.K. Shukla, executive director of Chhattisgarh Bio-fuel Development Authority.

According to Oudhia, the plant has negative effects on the soil, flora and fauna as well.

'Jatropha is a poisonous weed and is harmful for soil, especially in the case of monoculture. Research has shown that jatropha has harmful effects on Indian crops like pigeon pea. Large-scale plantation may also have a negative impact on soil,' he cautioned.

'Jatropha monoculture has been termed as a future natural disaster by environmentalists.'

Oudhia added that the wastelands where jatropha plantation is in progress in several Indian states supports billions of micro-flora and fauna. And if they were harmed, it would have a negative impact on the ecosystem.

'Many Indian states are planting jatropha in school compounds and near human population. An increasing number of accidental feeding cases indicate that planners have failed to make people aware about its toxicity,' he pointed out.

The scientist said that planting jatropha near water sources was hazardous for indigenous fish species too.

Oudhia said that the fumes of jatropha seed oil could also be unsafe for inhaling. 'Chhattisgarh villagers use jatropha oil fumes as insect repellent and always cover their nose to avoid inhalation,' he said.

'Jatropha planners claim that the fumes are safe but there is no scientific study available on this aspect. There is a need for long-term studies on its impact on human beings, livestock and plants before giving the green signal for its large scale plantation and use as bio-diesel,' he stressed.

Sujeet Kumar (© IANS / India eNews)