

## Farmers in Himachal Pradesh turn to kiwi cultivation

Fruit growers in Himachal Pradesh are increasingly taking to commercial cultivation of the exotic kiwi fruit. Horticulture experts say it's a good step towards crop diversification and fetching them good returns too.

Successful cultivation of kiwi along with pomegranate, cherry and strawberry by progressive farmers in the state has encouraged the horticulture experts to promote the cultivation of this fruit crop, a shift from traditional apple cultivation.

'Mid-hills and valleys of Solan, Shimla, Sirmaur, Mandi and Kullu districts are ideally suited for kiwi cultivation. It's ideal for crop diversification and has a market among high-end consumers,' Sudhir Katiha, assistant project officer of the state horticulture department, told IANS here.

He said in certain areas the production of apple has been severely affected by climate changes.

'In certain pockets of Kullu, Mandi and Shimla districts, the production of apple has declined due to climatic changes. Apple orchards require 1,000 to 1,600 hours of chill, while kiwi requires just 200 hours of chill for a favourable crop. Farmers in the areas where the chilling hours are not static now have opted for kiwi cultivation as a cash crop,' he said.

As per horticulture department estimates, at least 200 farmers in the Kullu valley alone have taken up kiwi cultivation.

'A group of farmers in Kullu has started cultivation of kiwi. This encouraged the farmers in other districts of Mandi and Shimla to opt for cultivation of trans-climatic hybrid fruit in the apple-dominated areas,' horticulture director Gurdev Singh said.

Last year, the total kiwi yield in Himachal Pradesh - known as the fruit bowl of the country - was 137 tonnes, Singh added.

'These days the Hayward, Abbot, Allison and Bruno varieties of kiwi are cultivated on almost 120 hectares. Farmers are making good profit by selling it in the local markets,' he said.

Ramesh Kamta, a farmer from Shimla, said the price of kiwi at the local wholesale fruit market this year was Rs. 60-100 per kg. The kiwi crop that is ready by mid-September continues till October-end.

'Though people have not so far developed a liking for its peculiar tangy taste, its demand is quite good among certain buyers. Of course, its long shelf life is helpful for the growers,' he said.

Neel Kamal Thakur, a farmer of Patan village in Kullu, is growing kiwi at an altitude of 8,500 feet.

'Kiwi typically needs temperate climate to grow, but we (the farmers) have made it a success even at extremely low temperatures,' he said.

He said farmers in this economically backward area had also taken up the cultivation of exotic vegetables and other fruits to boost their income.

Approximately 200,000 hectares of land in Himachal Pradesh is under horticulture cultivation, which yields approximately half a million tonnes of different kinds of fruit. The state earns more than Rs.25 billion from cultivation of fruits and vegetables.

Apple is the state's main fruit crop and is being grown in nine out of 12 districts.

Besides apple, other fruits like pears, peaches, cherries, apricots, almonds and plums are the major commercial crops of Himachal Pradesh.

*Vishal Gulati* ( © IANS / India eNews)