

CSIR wants farmers to consider alternatives



Herbs like lemongrass fetch higher income for farmers.

To get farmers to diversify from the traditional fare of food and cash crops, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) is looking to take a cue from the Green Revolution.

Just as rice, wheat and cotton are among the 25 crops that qualify for a government-mandated minimum support price, the CSIR is framing a proposal to push for mentha (the plant that gives menthol), lavender, lemongrass, artemisia annua (the source of the antimalarial compound artemisinin), geranium, lavender and rose oil to be included in such a category.

CSIR's hope is that assured prices will lead to farmers committing more land to aromatic and medicinal plants. Officials said that in the next three years, the CSIR plans to cultivate 5,000-6,000 hectares in the country. They will begin this year with drought-ravaged Vidarbha, Maharashtra, and move on to Bhuj in Gujarat and the Bundelkhand region of U.P. and Madhya Pradesh.

"Mentha farmers get profits of at least Rs. 1 lakh a hectare," said Anil Tripathi, Director, CSIR-Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants. "These are high-value plants with excellent export potential."

Dramatic turnaround

India was an importer of mentha 40 years ago. Today it is the world's leading producer. This is because mentha varieties were specifically bred to exude greater quantities of menthol mint oil. In 2014, mentha acreage spanned 3,00,000 hectares. A necessary step, however, would be to set up oil-extraction facilities near farms.

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