



QSA Notes

people, places & projects

JACKIE PERKINS | QSA ADMINISTRATOR



Homestead gardens in Tamil Nadu

At QSA's project partner Pitchandikulam Forest in Tamil Nadu, South India, homestead gardens are traditional sources of herbal plants for the production of local remedies as well as providing raw material for the local healers who use traditional medicines in their pharmacopeia. Using funding from QSA and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade—Australian Aid, there has been training in seed collection, how to grow a variety of indigenous plants, and how these plants can benefit health and wellbeing. The herbs are made into medicines, herbal teas and included in general cooking. A recent initiative of the establishment of a herbal food production unit in the village of Vandipalayam has been built on the increasing community interest in herb products and the income generating opportunities they present. The Meera Herbal Food Unit encourages the concept that 'food is medicine, and medicine is our food.' The Meera herbal food products include over ten types of herbal chutneys, herbal flours and batter and other powders that are used as traditional food supplements. The products

produced are labelled in the local language using local terms to encourage the revival of traditional knowledge regarding the health benefits of the ingredients. The women have been trained in herbal plant collection, semi processing, preparation of food, book keeping and marketing aspects. Traditional knowledge plays an important role here, as many of the ingredients are known to the community and are easily identified and consumed. Fifteen women have been trained in the collection and production of herbal food so far. They have built a good team and have learnt business management and record keeping skills. Decisions are discussed together and they value the equal sharing of responsibility, particularly for many of the women for whom this is a new concept. Currently they are making an income of Rs120 (\$2.50) per day which is making a difference in their lives as the following two stories illustrate.

Sasikala—Meera Herbal Food

Sasikala is 31 years old and was born to farmers and has one brother who is now 30 years old. 'I regret it very much, but I was

only able to study until the 3rd standard, so I cannot write.' Sasikala shares how she would have loved to have studied more because she is very self-conscious about how she speaks as she feels she cannot communicate as well as others can. Sasikala says she feels she was oblivious to the problems at home as a child 'You know when you are small, you don't notice things like that,' but adds 'it's only after marriage that things began to get difficult.' Her husband also works in farming, and she shares that it is difficult with his income to pay for even small expenses. 'Sometimes he won't go for work as the work is not so regular and he is not always called.' Having joined the enterprise Sasikala feels that the training in herbs was very good and she is very pleased with what she has learnt. Sasikala shares that 'I am happy that these people have come to help us with making this work happen. We are getting good feedback about the things we sell, that it is helping with appetite problems and cold and many problems. It is good to get this feedback from people.' Sasikala suggests that 'We need to grow the enterprise with more energy, this will give



Sasikala—Meera Herbal Food



Lakshmi—Meera Herbal Food

us more income. If we do it as if it is our own, then only it will succeed and grow. We must work hard to earn. I didn't study, so I hope my children will study. So I will work hard, as this is my hope.'

Lakshmi—Meera Herbal Food

Lakshmi is now 55 years old and lives in Vandipalayam. She was the only girl and had three brothers. 'I did not go to school, neither did my husband who is a farmer. My daughters are 25 and 35 years old and are both married farmers, and they both studied till the 10th grade.' Lakshmi's husband is old and she says he is often ill so he cannot do much. He spends his days at home while she goes out to work. His income used to support the family, but now Lakshmi's does. She explains, 'I am getting older, so to pluck the ingredients for the mixtures from

here and there, and walk the distances is not so easy anymore. But I need to feed the family. We had times we had little or no food, so we do not want that again.' The problem Lakshmi says is that 'We had no idea how to make money,' she says, 'but now we are getting told how we can do it, which is good.' Lakshmi remembers her village when she was younger, and says that going to school was not normal, as the majority were farmers living with very little. Lakshmi explains that farming work is not easy, income is irregular and cannot be easily predicted as the crop yield and prices vary according to many different factors. Although Lakshmi says she is happy working, she is worried about the near future as she is aware of her aging body. 'The income I get is enough to feed us both and pay for his treatments, but

what will we rely on when I cannot work anymore?' Lakshmi expresses her content in finding a group to work with and that she is eager to push forward to ensure the success of the enterprise, so that she hopes, it may support her in the future when the times get more difficult.

All photos in this edition of QSA Notes are credited to Pitchandikulam Forest and permission has been given for the photos.

AF

QSA is a member of the Australian Council for International Development, and is a signatory to the ACFID Code of Conduct. The Purpose of QSA is to express in a practical way the concern of Australian Quakers for the building of a more peaceful, equitable, just and compassionate world. To this end QSA works with communities in need to improve their quality of life with projects which are culturally sensitive, as well as being economically and environmentally appropriate and sustainable.

119 Devonshire St Surry Hills, NSW 2010 Australia • administration@qsa.org.au
PHONE +61 2 9698 9103 • FAX: +61 2 9225 9241 • ABN 35 989 797 918



ACFID
MEMBER