

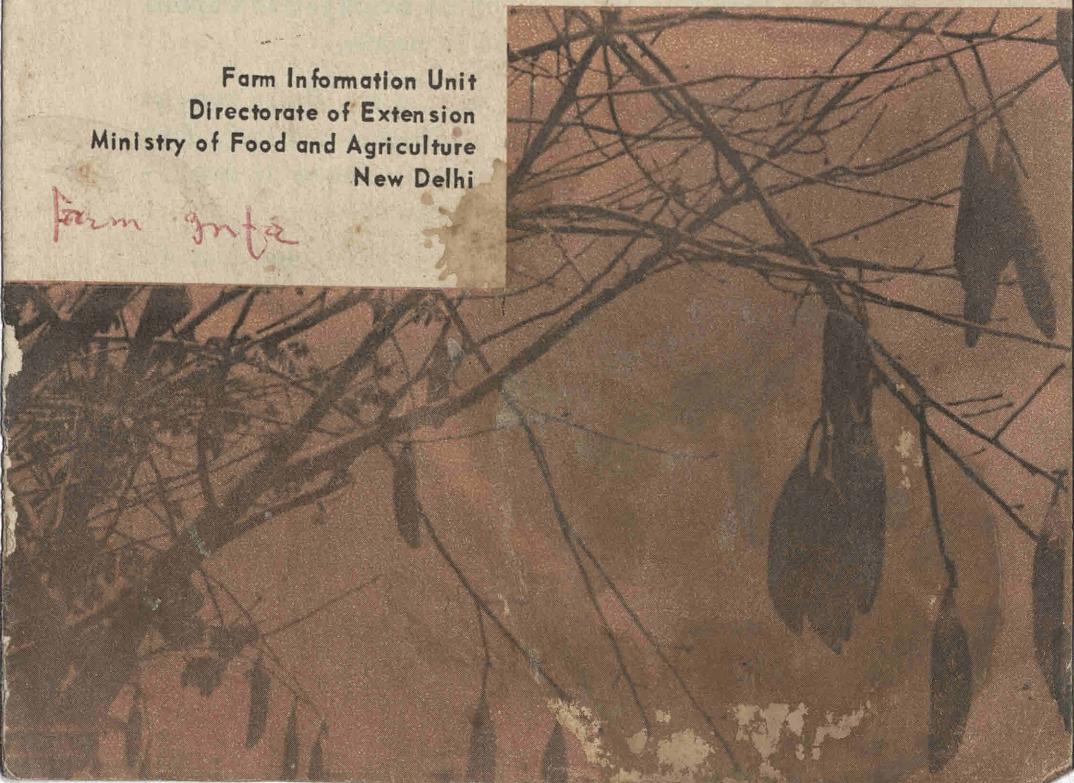
Information Leaflet No. 66



# The *Silk* cotton tree

Farm Information Unit  
Directorate of Extension  
Ministry of Food and Agriculture  
New Delhi

*farm info*



# The *Silk* cotton tree

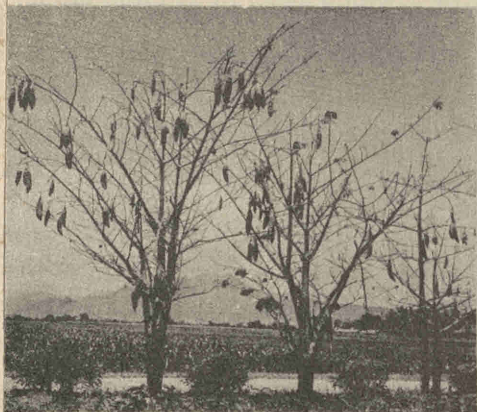
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A silk cotton avenue is a good source of income. A single tree fetches as much as twenty-five rupees from the special type of cotton it yields.

The silk cotton tree gives a smooth, fluffy type of cotton. It makes excellent stuffing material for mattresses, pillows, cushions, etc. There is everywhere a ready market for such cotton.

You can plant the trees in avenues and on boundaries of fields. Once established, the trees will thrive without much attention. The women and children of the household can pick the pods and remove the cotton in their leisure hours.

## GROW THIS VARIETY

The variety *Ceiba pentandra* is superior to the local varieties of silk cotton. It has strikingly larger pods than the local varieties, and each pod has an average length and girth of 26 centimetres and 15

centimetres respectively. The pods are borne in a profusion of clusters on a well-branched tree. The pods in this variety just split when mature and dried, but do not burst open. The floss is not, therefore, carried away by the wind.

The tree yields better when well-supplied with moisture. It, however, grows quite satisfactorily even on the driest patches on the hill tops. It can tolerate shade. It can, therefore, be grown almost everywhere - in the countryside or in gardens in towns - with profit.

### RAISE SEEDLINGS

You can grow the silk cotton plant from the seed. The seeds are available in April-May, and you can sow them in the nursery with the receipt of monsoon showers. The seeds are hard to germinate. So soak them in hot water at 90° C for ten minutes, before sowing.

Ordinarily, you may sow the seeds in nursery in August. The seedlings will live on without watering till May next when they can be transplanted.

Prepare the nursery bed by stirring the soil to a fine tilth. Give it a light sprinkling of well-rotted manure. Level the bed. Sow the seeds one centimetre deep at a distance of five centimetres x five centimetres. Sprinkle water over the bed gently with a rose-can. Water daily, if there is no rain.

The seeds germinate in about ten days after sowing. Once the seedlings are about a month old, you may stop watering. The seedlings will live on in the nursery till transplanting is done in the beginning of the next monsoon.

However, if you have to sow the seeds in May for early transplanting, you should raise the nursery in pots or discarded deal-wood boxes.

Fill the boxes or pots with a potting mixture, consisting well-rotted cattle manure, fine sand and soil mixed in equal quantities. Sieve the mixture. Spread a layer of small pieces of bricks or gravel at the bottom of the pots. Fill the pots with the potting mixture, keeping the coarser particles at the bottom and the finer at the top. Sow the seeds one centimetre deep. Water regularly, using a rose can.

Alternatively, dig a shallow trench 15 centimetres deep, in the ground. Fill the trench with materials like rubble, chopped twigs, dry leaves, etc. Over these, spread gravelly soil to cover them and to form an even, firm but spongy surface. This will provide good aeration and drainage, and will prevent the soil at the top from becoming hard. Over this bed, spread a five-centimetre thick layer of coarser potting mixture. Finally, spread the finer potting mixture at the top in a five-centimetre thick layer. Sow the seeds and water the bed as usual.

Check ants from attacking the seedlings by putting a band of DDT or BHC powder around the nursery bed.

### TRANSPLANT SEEDLINGS

At the permanent site, dig planting pits, measuring 30 centimetres x 30 centimetres x 30 centimetres, keeping a distance of at least six metres between two plants.

Burn dried leaves and twigs in the pits. This will sterilize the soil and provide ash which is good for plants. After a few days, fill the pits up to ten centimetres with chopped twigs and branches. Then fill

the rest of the pits with three parts of soil mixed with one part of well-rotted farmyard manure.

You may instead prepare the pits by filling them with green leaves and good surface soil. This should be done at least two months before planting, to allow the soil in the pits to settle down properly.

Water the nursery bed and the planting pits, a day or so before planting, so that the soil is moist but not sticky at the time of transplanting.

Lift a seedling carefully along with a ball of earth around the roots. Do this gently so as to avoid injury to the roots. Scoop out soil from the planting pit and place the plant along with the ball of earth. Place soil around the ball of earth, and press it gently to make the soil firm around the roots. Water the plants liberally. But avoid stagnation of water. It is good to transplant in the evening.

If you do the planting in the beginning of monsoon, the plants will not need much watering. If you do it later, water the plants once a week.

Manure the plants in the beginning of the monsoon. Also dig the soil lightly around the plants.

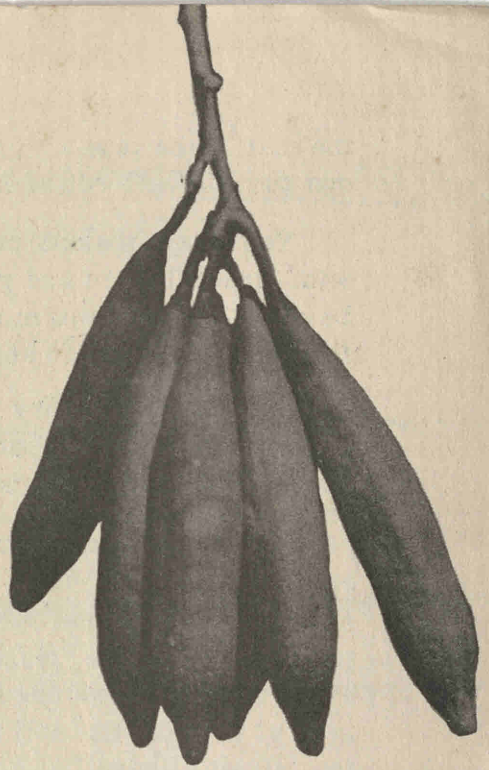
#### HARVEST IN TIME

The trees begin to yield from the fourth year of planting, but they are at their best from the seventh year. They bear regularly. Flowering begins in November-December. The trees, shed their leaves just before flowering.

If there is heavy bearing, provide supports to the branches to protect them from breaking due to the weight of the pods. The pods are ready for harvest in March.

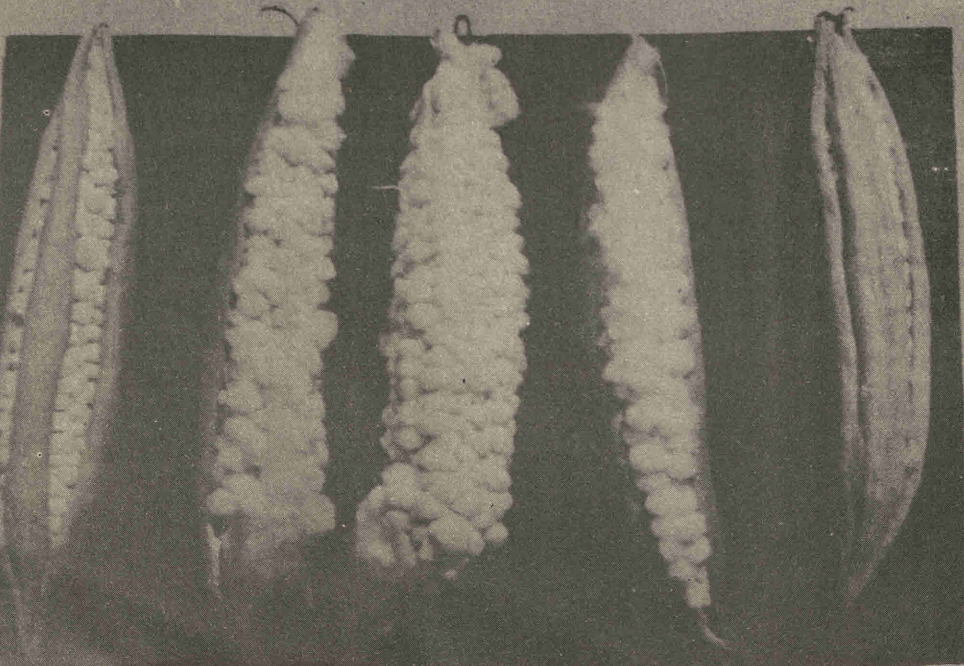
Pick the pods with a hooked pole, when they start drying up. Dry them for four to six days till the rind splits. Peel off the rind and separate the floss from the central core.

Put the floss in a circular bin up to a height of about 60 centimetres. Churn the floss with the help of a pole having a star-shaped projection at the lower end. This way the seeds will become separated from the floss and will get collected at the bottom of the bin.



*Pods are borne in bunches of five or six*

*The pods just split when mature, therefore, the floss is not carried away by the wind*



A good tree bears about a thousand pods per year. It gives about seven kilograms of clean fluff valued at Rs. 20 to 25.

The yield of seeds comes to about 700 grams per tree. A gram of seed contains 15 to 16 seeds.

#### SAVE FROM BATS

There are few enemies of the silk cotton tree. Bats sometimes damage the fruits by nibbling at them. If you find the attack too severe, you may fix a few scarers and drive them away.



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