

## Save the fruit

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Uppage trees are badly damaged during harvest as some collectors cut branches, or even entire trees, to get at the fruit.



Uppage (*Garcinia gummi-gutta*) is the Kannada name for a tree that grows in the forests of the Western Ghats. For centuries, people have used the peel of the fruit to spice fish and pork curries. Next time you eat *pandi* curry in Coorg or *meen porichathu* in Kerala, thank this fruit for that special taste.

In the late 1980s scientists discovered that the peel of *uppage* fruit contained Hydroxy-citric acid (HCA), which could help people lose weight. This resulted in a booming market for HCA, especially in the U.S. where, due to ballooning waists, there was a great demand for "natural" weight-loss drugs. Fruits were therefore harvested from the forest and HCA extracted from the fruits in factories and subsequently exported to the U.S.

The joy of fruit collectors and traders was however short lived. A study by a U.S. university on the effectiveness of the drug for weight loss showed that the study group that was not given the drug actually lost more weight than the group that was given the HCA pills! As a result, the price of *uppage* rind dropped causing a big impact on the income of harvesters as well as processors.

*Uppage* trees grow to about 20m and only the female trees produce fruit. Many species of monkeys, squirrels and civet cats consume the fruits. They eat the pulp of the ripe fruit and drop the peel from where harvesters collect it. So animals and people can benefit if the fruits are allowed to ripen on the tree.

The increased value of the peel and the competition between collectors for *uppage* has resulted in people harvesting fruits before they ripen. Trees are often badly damaged during harvest as some collectors cut down branches or even the whole tree. After harvest, the fruits are taken to the collectors' homes and the peel is dried over a wood fire. This is then sold to a government-appointed trader. Although it is illegal, harvesters also sell rind in the black market, where they can get higher prices due to the bypassing of government fees. Traders sell the rind to factories, where the extracted HCA, in either powder or liquid form, is exported.

When *uppage* trees occur in forests that are owned by the government, harvesters show little concern for the trees during harvest, in contrast to when they own the trees or are assured of continued access. So perhaps giving local people control over the forest will encourage harvesters to wait for fruits to ripen. Moreover, delaying the date of fruit harvest ensures that monkeys consume the ripe fruit and disperse seeds. Dispersed seeds means more seedlings, and therefore more trees in the forest for the benefit of all, so we can continue to enjoy lip smacking *pandi* curry or *meen* curry.

### **What can I do?**

- Next time you visit a forest in the Western Ghats ask someone to show you an *uppage* (in Kannada), *mantapuli* (in Kodava) or *kodampuli* (in Malayalam and Tamil) tree. See if you can tell if it is a male or female tree. Ask local people if they use the fruits and whether they sell the dried peel.
- Visit your local medical store and ask to be shown a few slimming products. Look at the ingredients and see if it has *garcinia*, which is the scientific name of *uppage*. Despite studies showing that *garcinia* extract is not very effective in weight loss, you will find that *garcinia* products continue to be sold.

*In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group*