

Long live Curcuma

SUNITA RAO

Turmeric seems to be the miracle cure for most ills.

V. Ganesan



If I were to be asked to name a single plant that has come to hold sway over my life, I would say it was turmeric. Yes, the humble *haldi* (*manjal* in Tamil and *arishina* in Kannada) that is found in Indian kitchens and has been used for centuries. Until two years ago this culinary connection is all the respect I accorded it. Two years ago I bought a farm in Karnataka in the Western Ghats. Wanting to be as eco friendly as possible when building my cottage I bought the wood second hand from a traditional house in the vicinity that was being demolished. I visited the old homestead deep in the forests, with areca (*supari*) orchards surrounding it. It was named Arishina Manay (turmeric home). The monsoon came along, and it was time to plant my first crop. I did not have a clue what to do. A kind neighbour generously donated a bagful of turmeric rhizomes, and so *Curcuma longa* became my very first crop. It grew well without much care, and by *Ganesh Chaturthi* there were leaves to make the traditional *kadbu* (a sweet made from steaming rice paste) with.

Life on the farm went on, weeding being an inevitable, back breaking part. One morning, I stepped right on a Touch-me-not plant, and one of its thorns got stuck in my toe. It lay there for days getting more painful. I tried getting it out with a pair of tweezers, then a heated needle, and then finally to brutally squeeze it out. Nothing worked. My ayurvedic doctor told me to make a paste of turmeric, wheat flour, castor oil, and salt, and tie a poultice around the toe. I followed her advice rather sceptically. That evening, when I squeezed my toe a bit, I was amazed to see the thorn neatly and painlessly ease its way out. It was then that a pattern began forming about my association with this one plant. Of course I had read about the healing/antiseptic property of turmeric trying to be patented by an American company. Fortunately it was stalled in time. But what was happening to me was something else — something real, tangible, and rather intimate, thorns and all!

Subsequently I went on to eat turmeric *chutney*, turmeric pickle, and a delicious coconut-curd based appetiser called *tumbli* made with this yellow rhizome. When the itching from tick bites became unbearable, I found much sought after relief by applying coconut oil to which turmeric and cardamom powder had been added and boiled. In winter, when I had a bad cough one of the ingredients that went into a hot local brew was — well you know it by now surely!

The puppies on the farm have a pinch of turmeric and a clove of garlic each cooked in their food every day. One of them came hairless with a bad skin rash that was festering. I gently massaged her with coconut oil to which turmeric and sulphur had been added, and let her bask in the sun. It worked like magic over two weeks.

In the meanwhile, we have swung into the monsoons yet again, and are mighty grateful for it. I fumigated my mud and tile cottage recently with a mixture of *sambrani* (*dhoop*), mustard seeds, and turmeric. Along with ragi, jowar, rice, pepper, ginger, and vegetables, turmeric got planted in a large quantity again this year. If all goes well, some of it will be a part of a vegetable colour campaign during Holi next year in Pune. It pleases me no end to think that farm produce will play a role in minimising the use of toxic colours. It also gives me hope that organic, ecological farming can gain a stronger foothold in the years to come.

My next plan is to begin getting information on the myriad varieties of turmeric, including mango-turmeric (*manga-inji* or mango ginger, which in fact is not ginger at all). Who knows what might turn up? Anyone out there wanting to help?

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh/ National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan