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Sadanga Farmers : See Bright Prospects in Heirloom Rice Production

Due to the increasing costs of commercial, chemical farm inputs, farmers in Sadanga, Mt. Province are again cultivating heirloom rice varieties, which are grown following organic, indigenous farming practices.

One of them is 74-year-old Godoliva Galingan. According to her, the yield of her heirloom rice she cultivated in the rice terraces is comparable with the yield of new rice varieties that are fertilized with commercial fertilizers.

Like other rice farmers in Sadanga, she also tried cultivating high-yielding varieties. Their yield then was about 4 tons to 5 tons per hectare in their first crop. However, they discontinued because they observed that their succeeding crops produced a very low yield unless they apply chemical farm inputs. These are more expensive nowadays as the prizes are spiraling upward. In Bontoc, for instance, a 50-kilo bag of urea fertilizer that was sold at P900 in December 2007 now costs P1,850. If Godoliva did not shift to heirloom rice production, her rice farming would be less and less profitable or worse, it might even be unsustainable.

This is not the case with pest- and disease-resistant heirloom rice. The average harvest from it is 3.5 tons to 4 tons per hectare, and this is comparable with the current average national harvest from certified and good rice seeds.

INDIGENOUS CULTIVATION OF HEIRLOOM RICE

Cordillera is rich in rice germplasm. According to the inventory done by the Central Cordillera Agricultural Programme in 25 municipalities in the late `90s, farmers were growing 246 staple rice varieties, 21 upland rice varieties, and 41 glutinous varieties.

It is believed that these heirloom rice varieties that mature in six to eight months are strains of the Japonica rice, while some people claim that these belong to the Javanica rice family.

In Sadanga, the old folks used to grow more than 15 heirloom rice varieties that vary in color when milled. Their colors vary from red, dark red or black, yellow to white, says Godoliva.

“All the heirloom rice varieties have good yield. These also have good aroma and taste so these can be eaten without viand. This is the reason why we are still producing these varieties all these years,” she adds.

Farmers there now use as many as 5 to 10 varieties. And on the average, each farmer plants at least 4 to 5 varieties in terraced paddies to make sure that crops are suited to the varied temperature, elevations of landholdings, cropping season, and varied ecosystems (upland or rainfed or irrigated).

Women usually do the seed selection. During the vegetative stage of rice plants, they go out to the field to identify rice plants they deemed would produce good seeds. They judge these in terms of health, productive tillers, length of panicles, solid grains, and yield. During harvest, they segregate seeds for drying and storing.

During seeding, farmers soak the seeds in whole panicles. They do this because they prefer to use those in the middle of the panicle, which are observed to be stronger and grow better than those at the tip or apex. They also prevent the seedlings from being stressed during transplanting; hence, they grow these near the field and carefully uproot these when ready for planting.

Regarding fertilization, they fertilize heirloom rice with composted forest litter, leaves, grasses, sunflower, and pig manure among other organic materials. They leave the stalks of harvested grains and panicles to rot in the field and plow these back to the soil to prevent the “mining out” of minerals and nutrients in the soil.

For best result, farmers step on the harvested rice stalks to incorporate these right away into the muddy soil. “We do this so that there would be enough time for the stalks to decompose,” Godoliva said.

Most of the rice terraces are deficient in zinc because of continuous flooding. Some farmers in Sadanga address this problem by planting sweet potato after rice because dryland cultivation of sweet potato aerates the soil and makes zinc available for the succeeding rice crop. On the other hand, other farmers aerate the soil by simply turning it over along with the weeds and stalks after harvest. This practice is called falenan.

Aside from these indigenous farming practices, the local folks are also still practicing cultural festivals like the Jhegnas. It’s a community festival of thanksgiving and sharing harvest. Godoliva said that in the old days, neighbors share their heirloom rice harvests and eat these together. She also remembers

that farmers then were storing their heirloom rice in their agamang or granaries for as long as 10 years-that's how good their harvest was back then.

PROMOTING, PRODUCING AND EXPORTING HEIRLOOM RICE

Today, says Sadanga Vice Mayor Francis Dangiwan, the problem on heirloom rice is not low yield, but the limited land area where these varieties are grown. The average land area for native rice production throughout the province is only 300 square meters.

In spite of this, there's a bright future waiting for the heirloom rice farmers in Sadanga and elsewhere in Cordillera for the government and three organizations are working together to promote heirloom rice production to expand its market here and abroad.

One of these organizations is the Provincial Heirloom Rice Growers Federation, which Dangiwan heads. It was organized to help heirloom rice farmers grow, market, and export their produce at a premium price through the Revitalize Indigenous Cordillera Entrepreneur Incorporated (RICE, Inc.) and the U.S.-based marketing entity Eighth Wonder, Incorporated.

Eighth Wonder, Incorporated has successfully promoted the unoy rice of Kalinga and tinawon rice of Ifugao in the U.S. market. And now they also wanted to promote the Igorot heirloom rice varieties of Mt. Province. Out of 30 varieties, 11 passed their standards.

At present, Mary Hensley, head of Eighth Wonder, Incorporated, has already communicated with the Slow Food Foundation. It's an international organization based in Italy that counteracts fast food and fast life, disappearance of local food traditions, and people's dwindling interest in where our food come from and how our food choices affect the world.

Hensley wants to register these heirloom rice varieties at the Foundation as this will increase the interest of the international gourmet market in heirloom rice. Due to this, Eighth Wonder Incorporated and RICE, Inc. are training farmers selected by the Federation on production, processing, and packaging export-quality heirloom rice using the fund from the Department of Agriculture-Agricultural Training Institute.

"In the end, Dangiwan concludes, "this [export venture will make] local farmers [take] great pride in their heirloom rice. More importantly, this will also inspire them to revitalize and sustain the rice terraces."

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