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Emerging Practices in Riverbed Cultivation of Cucurbitaceous Crops: Increasing Yield and

Razauddin[1], Sutanu maji[2*], Sanjay Kumar[3], Ramesh chand meena[4]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of Horticulture
[2]Associate professor, Department of Horticulture
[3]Senior Professor, Department of Horticulture
[4]Research Scholar, Department of Horticulture

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INTRODUCTION

Riverbed farming, or diara or sandbank cultivation, involves fertile alluvial deposits on riverbanks for the production of seasonal crops. This practice, common in areas with fluctuating water levels, is best suited to cucurbitaceous crops like watermelon, muskmelon, cucumber, and pumpkin because of their suitability to well-drained, sandy soil. The system presents a financially viable and environmentally sustainable livelihood opportunity for farmers in flood-prone regions, allowing them to make use of previously unproductive land and reduce hazards brought about by recurring flooding. The method also presents a window of opportunity for off-season crop farming, increasing farmers' incomes and competitiveness in the market.

Cultivation on riverbeds, or "Diara land farming" or "sandbank farming," is a special mode of cultivation on riverbanks and floodplains during the dry season when the riverbeds are dry. The method uses the nutrient-full alluvial soil brought by the rivers and is naturally full of nutrients, needing little use of fertilizers. The technique is especially beneficial for cucurbitaceous plants like watermelon, cucumber, pumpkin, bottle gourd, and muskmelon.

This new practice has become fashionable in areas where traditional agriculture has been hindered by water limitation, soil loss, or unavailability of land. Riverbed cultivation not only offers a complementary source of livelihood for marginal farmers and landless farmers but also ensures optimal use of natural resources. The technique, however, needs to be managed with attention to ensure that production is sustained and soil loss or over-harvesting is avoided.

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This paper examines the advantages, disadvantages, and eco-friendly methods of riverbed cultivation of cucurbitaceous vegetables, with emphasis on new techniques to boost productivity without disturbing the environmental balance.

Advantages of Riverbed Cultivation

Use of Barren Land: Converts unproductive and frequently unused riverbeds into productive farmland, providing a stable source of income for marginal and landless farmers while taking some of the pressure off of traditional agricultural land.

High Soil Fertility: The soil's fertile alluvial deposits come enriched with necessary nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, which greatly minimize the reliance on artificial fertilizers. The organic fertility optimizes crop vigor, increases yields, and decreases input costs, further promoting sustainable cultivation procedures.

Off-Season Production: Leveraging early planting and optimal soil conditions, riverbed cultivation allows the production of high-demand cucurbitaceous crops during off-seasons. This approach ensures premium market prices, steady income, and reduces market saturation, benefiting both farmers and consumers.

Effective Water Utilization: The location near water bodies facilitates effective natural irrigation, which lessens the reliance on mechanical irrigation systems. This method not only reduces water usage but also decreases operational expenses and saves precious water resources, thus making riverbed farming an environmentally friendly and sustainable activity.

Climate Adaptability: The planting season is strategically planned for dry periods when water recedes, enabling the crops to grow and mature prior to floods. This minimizes the threats that come with unreliable rainfall patterns, protects crops against flood damage, and guarantees safe harvests during unfavorable climatic conditions.

Improved Practices for High Productivity

1. Raised Bed Planting Technique

Raised bed planting entails lifting soil into beds of 15-30 cm in height and 1-1.5 m in width, with intervening channels for effective drainage. This method enhances root development, lowers waterlogging, and curbs root rot. It also promotes enhanced soil aeration, increased soil temperature, and improved weed management, ultimately leading to increased crop vigor and productivity.

2. Mulching for Water Conservation

Mulching entails placing organic mulch such as straw, grass clippings, or biodegradable plastics on the soil surface surrounding crops. Mulching prevents water loss from the soil by limiting evaporation, regulates soil temperature, prevents weeds from germinating, and adds fertility to the soil when organic mulches break down. Mulch also shields the soil from erosion, increases water infiltration, and limits pest infestation, eventually leading to healthy and robust plant growth.

3. Drip Irrigation and Fertigation

Drip irrigation is an extremely efficient irrigation system that provides water to the plant root zone by means of a system of tubes, emitters, and valves. When coupled with fertigation the application of fertilizers using irrigation water—it provides exact nutrient delivery according to crop needs. This method reduces wastage of water, suppresses weed growth, and ensures uniform plant growth. The regulated delivery of water and nutrients prevents leaching and runoff of nutrients, improving soil health and crop yields. This process is especially suitable for cucurbitaceous vegetables, which need uniform

moisture and balanced nutrition to grow optimally.

4. Improved Varieties and Hybrids

Choosing high-yielding, disease-resistant, and climate-tolerant hybrids that are specifically suited for sandy soils is critical to achieving maximum productivity in riverbed farming. Such hybrids are genetically developed to perform well in adverse conditions, with tolerance to drought, pests, and diseases. Early-maturing varieties also enable farmers to harvest crops ahead of seasonal floods, minimizing crop loss risks. Utilizing genetically superior seeds guarantees increased yields, consistent produce quality, and better marketability, making riverbed farming a profitable and sustainable venture.

5. Integrated Pest Management (IPM)

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) refers to a synergistic method utilizing biological, cultural, mechanical, and chemical approaches to manage pest and disease at a sustainable cost. This is a strategy for preventive management using measures such as the selection of pest-resistant types, field cleanliness, and rotation of crops. Biological control factors, such as beneficial insects and microbial products, suppress the levels of pests organically. Pest monitoring and mass-trapping is done using pheromone traps and light traps, and organic and selective chemical pesticides are sprayed judiciously to reduce environmental load. Adoption of IPM in riverbed cultivation provides efficient control of pests, decreases chemical residues, and supports ecological equilibrium.

Sustainability and Environmental Benefits

Riverbed cultivation presents strong environmental and sustainability benefits and is a very suitable practice for green farming. Farmers can use natural resources sustainably and conserve the environment to ensure maximum production with minimal impact on the environment.

Soil Conservation: Checks soil erosion through the stabilization of loose sandy soil, conservation of soil structure, and maintenance of organic matter level. The practice curbs sediment runoff, promotes soil health, and ensures long-term productivity.

Water Conservation: Drip irrigation provides water to the root zone in a very efficient way, reducing evaporation and runoff. Precision watering through this method saves water resources, decreases total water usage, and provides the best moisture content for the growth of crops, even under dry conditions.

Climate Adaptability: Crops are planted in a strategic manner to ripen prior to the arrival of seasonal floods, thus lowering climate-related risks considerably. This timely planting strategy takes advantage of the natural receding of water levels, allowing for successful harvests even in flood-affected areas. By reducing risks from unpredictable rainfall and floods, riverbed cultivation provides stable crop production and guaranteed income for farmers.

Challenges and Solutions

Flood Vulnerability: Cultivation along riverbeds is vulnerable to floods, leading to crop destruction and yield decline. Early sowing methods and growing short-duration flood-tolerant varieties mitigate such risks. Raised bed and efficient drainage facility approaches can reduce the risk of waterlogging even more.

Soil Erosion: The loose and sandy nature of riverbed soils predisposes them to erosion, particularly when there are heavy rains or floods. Organic mulching, planting cover crops, and contour farming methods can greatly minimize erosion, improve soil structure, and increase soil fertility.

Pest and Disease Pressure: Riverbed humidity is conducive to pest and disease development. Crop rotation, biological control organisms, and organic insecticides are among the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) measures employed to regulate pests sustainably. Regular surveillance and prompt intervention ensure successful management of pests and diseases.

CONCLUSION

Novel riverbed farming techniques immensely raise the productivity, profitability, and sustainability of cucurbit crops, offering a sustainable and nature-friendly agriculture approach for flood zones. By incorporating cutting-edge practices, superior hybrids, and organic practices, growers can harness the complete potential of this innovative practice, securing food security, financial stability, and sustainable livelihood.

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