

High prices boost mint cultivation

India produces 80% of the world's mint supply and exports 75% of its output

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The high price commanded by menthol oil in the international market, following the drop in supply of its synthetic variant, has propelled farmers to increase the area under mint cultivation. This year, the area under mint cultivation is estimated to touch 3,00,000 hectares, according to a scientist with the Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (CIMAP), a constituent laboratory of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research.

The price of natural menthol oil, on an average, is more than ₹1,500 a kg, as there has been a decline in the availability of synthetic menthol oil, used mainly for non-food applications, said CSIR-CIMAP scientist Sanjay Kumar, who was here attending a conference on mint cultivation organised by FICCI on Thursday.

Natural mint oil is very much in demand because a fire last year in a plant owned by German

chemicals major BASF, which produces a synthetic variant, crippled the supply, leading to an increase in the prices.

The prices of mint oil rose by more than 50 per cent in one year, prompting farmers to cultivate more. Synthetic menthol, which comes as a by-product of petroleum, can be manufactured at half the price of organic mint oil and whenever the latter's prices go up, particularly when they hit ₹1,000 and above, the demand for the synthetic oil shoots up.

According to SK Malhotra, Agriculture Commissioner of India, this year's menthol oil production in the country is estimated to be more than 30,000 tonnes. India exports nearly 22,500 tonnes of menthol oil annually.

"India produces 80 per cent of the world's mint supply, which supports the livelihood of more than 1 million small holder farmers. More than 70 per cent of Japanese mint oil and its derivat-



ives produced in India are exported," said Nilanjan Banik, professor at Bennett University in Greater Noida, in a publication brought out for the conference.

"Uttar Pradesh accounts for nearly 80 per cent of mint produced in the country. But, many other States in the country are getting into mint cultivation of late," said Kumar.

The price volatility is a major problem for mint. "The price of natural mint has been hit seri-

ously since the introduction of synthetic mint oil in 2013-14, a year which saw the highest production of menthol oil," said Kumar.

"The price was around ₹2,200 a kg in 2013-18, but it plummeted to ₹800 kg in 2014-15. Subsequently the prices started picked up as cultivation went down drastically. In 2017, mint prices moved up to ₹1,100 and they went up further in 2018 as synthetic menthol was in short supply," said Himanshu Agar-

Menthol oil output

(in tonnes)

2013-14	32,000
2014-15	24,000-25,000
2015-16	24,000-25,000
2016-17	26,000-27,000
2017-18	28,000-29,000
2018-19*	<30,000

*Estimated

wal, director of KV Aromatics, a trading company. According to Kumar, farmers have been somewhat protected from price fluctuations since commodity exchange MCX started trading the aromatic commodity in 2006. "More than the farmers, traders are affected by the price volatility nowadays," he said.

US-based confectionery maker Mars Wrigley has been working with Indian mint farmers since 2017. Because of its intervention around 20,000 farmers have adopted good agricultural practices in mint cultivation, helping them not only increase the yield but also reduce water usage by nearly 30 per cent, said Andrew Leakey, the company's General Manager.