

V. MAJOR PROBLEMS OF THE OFF-SEASON VEGETABLE GROWERS

The problems of off-season vegetable growers can be grouped under (i) Production and (ii) Marketing.

Production Problems

For promotion of off-season vegetable cultivation, it is highly desirable to maintain its productivity at a high level so that farmers are allured to include it in their cropping pattern. Since vegetable crops are more sensitive to climatic conditions and require more irrigation water and critical inputs as compared to other crops, they need special attention in the production process. Off-season vegetable producers are facing the below-mentioned problems in its production:

Supply of critical inputs

More than 70 per cent of the sampled farmers reported that critical inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, good quality seeds are not available in time in the government-managed agencies. They informed that they have to depend on private dealers located in towns. The pesticides and fertilizers sold by them are costlier. Therefore, they are not in a position to apply them as per recommendations of package practices. Efficacy of pesticides supplied by the government agencies is reported to be poor as compared to private traders. They suggested that the purchases of critical inputs made by them from private traders may be covered under subsidy programmes.

Off-season vegetable growers showed their frustration about the untimely supply of good quality seed/nursery plants by the government agencies. In the absence of timely and good quality seed, they have to depend on the mercy of private traders. The seeds/nursery plants supplied by private traders, are generally of low genetic quality as well as not properly treated against seed borne diseases. Thus, there is a need for proper and timely distribution of seed/nursery plants.

Non-availability of staking material due to the recent enactment of forest protection legislation to save the eco-balance have posed a threat to the cultivation of tomatoes, peas, and beans. It has been opined by the off-season vegetable growers that in case of non-availability of this from the forest area, they will be compelled to change their cropping system. Keeping in view the importance of staking material, there is a need for scientific studies to find out a suitable substitute. Staking of plastic/synthetic material can be visualised as one of the substitutes for this. The adoption of this will depend upon its comparative advantage over the present system. The second alternative may be plantation of bushes and fast growing short duration forest species having profuse branching system either on ghasnis owned by the cultivators or on the shamlet lands. The lopping of the trees grown under such scheme should be kept outside the purview of forest law.

Lack of Technical Know-how

Lack of technical know-how about the application of fertilizers, pesticides, and weedicides is also responsible for not achieving the desired goal. Farmers reported that they are spending a good amount of money on plant protection measures, but they are not able to save their crops particularly tomatoes. On inspecting crops in the field by experts and laboratory examinations it is revealed that application of pesticides/fungicides by the farmers and the cause of damage are not in conformity with the causal organisms. This clearly indicated the backward state of technical knowledge possessed by the growers. Lack of technical advice to the growers by the field staff trained in plant protection is the main reason for this. Thus, there is an urgent need of strengthening the plant protection wing in the off-season vegetable growing areas.

Lack of Finance

Weak financial condition of the majority of the marginal and small farmers prevented them from adopting the recommended package of practices for off-season vegetable cultivation. This leads to low productivity resulting in poor returns to them. Although the financial institutions are providing crop loans to the small and marginal farmers, the complicated procedures followed by them and their collateral requirement, generally resulted in farmers of these categories, not being able to avail themselves of credit facilities.

Marketing Problems

Exploitation by Private Traders

Marketing of off-season vegetables in the State is mostly in the hands of the private traders. In spite of governmental efforts, in the form of establishment of the HPMC and encouragement given to marketing cooperatives, the private traders still handle as much as 95 per cent of the produce. Although, these traders are collecting many unauthorised charges from the producers and are not making payments in time, the continued dependence on them calls for scrutiny of the marketing system and the evaluation of cooperative agencies engaged in marketing activities.

Shortage and Costs of Packing Materials

Packing of off-season vegetables particularly tomatoes and capsicums is done in wooden boxes. Off-season vegetable growers are facing an acute shortage of wood for the last several seasons. The total requirement of wood for the packing of fruits and off-season vegetables is estimated at more than 300 thousand m³. Thus, there is an urgent need to find alternative packing case materials. This requires immediate attention of scientists in the field of packing. Use of bamboo baskets may be one of the available alternatives.

Inadequate Transport Facilities

Better remunerative prices of the off-season vegetables depend upon the quality of the produce under prevailing climatic condition and requires fast refrigerated transportation facilities. The present system of transporting off-season vegetables in the State is inefficient and substantially injurious to the vegetable trade. The roads connecting off-season vegetable growing pockets with

terminal markets are not properly maintained, transport carriers operating on these roads are multi-purpose, and shock absorbers used in these vans do not help in avoiding bruising and other damages to the vegetables. Transporters are charging exorbitant freight rates during peak season of the crop from the growers. Besides this, the transshipment of produce on route also causes delay in transportation of off-season vegetable crops resulting into deterioration of quality. Thus, to have an efficient transportation system, proper all weather link-roads should be developed. The transportation charges should be fixed by the Government and off-season vegetable crops should be given priority at check posts/barriers.

Shortage of Cold Storage

Off-season vegetables, tomatoes in particular, being a highly perishable commodity has poor shelf life. After picking, a considerable part of the produce gets deteriorated during transportation from field to packing place. About 20 per cent of the total produce is estimated to be unfit for sale due to over ripening or damage caused during transit period. In order to prevent this huge loss, it is suggested that small cottage industries for vegetable preservation should be encouraged in the production areas.