

## Breaking free from wheat-paddy cycle: Nawanshahr farmer exports moringa powder worth Rs 1.5 crore to Germany

Courtesy: Anju Agnihotri Chhaba



In Ratnana village of Punjab's Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar (also known as Nawanshahr) district, 40-year-old Dr Pankaj Kumar has redefined sustainable farming by cultivating Moringa Oleifera, popularly known as the drumstick, Sahjan, or miracle tree, on two acres he rented. A postgraduate in yoga and naturopathy, Pankaj has not only broken away from the state's traditional wheat-paddy cycle but also elevated Punjab's presence in the global market. Through his company, Vela Cell India, Pankaj exports premium moringa leaf powder worth Rs 1 crore to Rs 1.5 crore annually to Germany. This is made possible by his partnership with German businessman Harald Seibel, who operates the Germany-based Vela Cell UG company. Pankaj began independent moringa cultivation in 2022 after leasing 8.5 acres for Rs 6 lakh annually. Drawing inspiration from his association with Harald and his previous partners, Pankaj, who has been working as a yoga instructor and naturopathy with Nawanshahr-based Kirpal Sagar Charitable Institute, where Harald had been a regular visitor, Pankaj decided to take over the cultivation. His familiarity with Harald's work in sourcing moringa from the area motivated him to revive the operations. With dedication and innovation, Pankaj now processes moringa leaves into high-quality green moringa powder, showcasing the potential of sustainable and organic farming in Punjab on a global platform.

Pankaj emphasises the meticulous process involved in producing and exporting organic moringa powder. The crop is grown under strict organic conditions, and certified under the National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) and the European Union (EU) standards. Each export batch undergoes rigorous testing in government-approved laboratories to ensure quality and compliance. To preserve its nutritional value, the powder is vacuum-packed in 2 kg silver pouches. Pankaj cultivates a high-density variety of Moringa, which is specifically designed to grow to a manageable height of 3-4 feet, allowing only the leaves to be harvested. "We planted fresh moringa saplings last August, and the leaves are harvested 3-4 times in a year," he explained. Once planted, Moringa trees, which grow rapidly, require very little water for irrigation and need to be replaced after 5-6 years. He further said that they prepare their own seeds and saplings for cultivation, ensuring the quality of their produce. "Unlike taller moringa trees where drumsticks are harvested, we focus solely on leaf production," he added. Describing the processing method, Pankaj highlighted the precision required to retain the nutritional integrity of leaves. The freshly picked leaves are washed in saline water thrice within 30 minutes of harvesting, as delays can lead to a loss of nutrients. They are then dried at controlled temperatures of 25–45°C to retain their nutritional value before being processed into powder at a facility near the fields. "Every step, from cultivation to packaging, is handled with utmost care to meet international standards," he emphasised. Sharing insights about the moringa yield, Pankaj said an acre of moringa cultivation produces 500–700 kg of powder annually, priced between Rs 10,000 and Rs 12,000 per kg. This translates to revenue of Rs 50–Rs 70 lakh per acre. "If a farmer follows all required parameters to produce high-quality moringa powder, they can easily earn Rs 25– Rs30 lakh per acre per annum after expenses." "Moringa powder is a natural immune booster. It is rich in calcium, Omega 3, 6, 9, magnesium and over 103 micronutrients. It treats malnutrition and prevents several deadliest diseases, which is why it has high global demands," Pankaj said. Speaking with *The Indian Express*, Harald, who is currently in Nawanshahr, praised the quality of moringa cultivated in Punjab. "I have been sourcing moringa powder from Punjab since 2018, initially through other partners. Now, I am collaborating with Pankaj," he said. Harald further said he brings teams of experts and scientists from Germany to inspect the moringa cultivation and processing units. Recently, a team of scientists and pharmacists from Germany visited the farm. After thorough testing and meeting all parameters, we import the powder to Germany, where the demand is substantial," he added. Pankaj uses organic

methods to control pests, including garlic and chilli paste and relies on cow dung as fertiliser. To prevent smoke and ash from affecting his crops, he manages stubble in nearby paddy fields so that it should not be set on fire after the fields' owners harvest the paddy. He also uses it as mulch on his farm to retain soil moisture and control weeds. In addition to moringa, Pankaj cultivates other medicinal plants on the remaining land such as ashwagandha, brahmi — also known as a brain power booster — and gotu kola. He also grows unique wheat varieties like black wheat, khpali wheat, and Sona Moti wheat, which fetch him premium prices. He sells wheat for Rs 8,000 per quintal, significantly higher than the government's MSP of Rs 2,400. He produces 80 kg of Brahmi powder annually and 50 kg of ashwagandha powder biennially, priced at Rs 13,000 to Rs 15,000 per kg, respectively. Additionally, he cultivates black turmeric (used for medicinal purposes), onions and mustard. Pankaj's farm includes a Rs 20 lakh processing unit and employs both permanent and seasonal workers for leaf picking and processing. Supported by his father Raj Kumar, Pankaj plans to expand moringa cultivation and medicinal farming. Originally from Alwar, Rajasthan, the family migrated to Punjab several years ago. "This is just the beginning. The demand for organic and medicinal products is immense, and I aim to increase cultivation gradually," Pankaj said. "My goal is not only to highlight the profitability of sustainable farming but also to showcase that nothing promotes your health more than nature itself and how innovation and dedication in farming can thrive in the global market," Pankaj emphasised.

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