

## **Sutlej keeping their fields waterlogged, Ferozepur farmers turn bane into boon**

Courtesy: Anju Agnihotri Chhaba



While growing up in a remote village in Ferozepur district, Avtar Singh often saw his father struggle to grow traditional wheat and paddy in their 10 acres. Due to the low-lying lands along Sutlej river, their field along Kunde Road would remain water-logged around the year. The stagnant water meant unpredictable harvests. While for most this would mean a lost cause, Avtar, now in his mid 30s, thought to make profit out of it. With unconventional thoughts and innovative ideas, he stumbled upon a plan to cultivate lotus. He realised the crop is naturally suited to such conditions. He took up lotus farming in 2010 after completing his class XII and witnessing positive results, he started farming the crop in all 10 acres. Gradually, he rented an additional 40 acres of low-lying land for Rs 64,000 annual and further expanded his crop. Despite being uncommon in the region, lotus farming is gaining traction among farmers who have stagnant water on their fields. Lotus crop not only requires low maintenance but farmers can earn by selling the flower, stem (kamal kakdi), root (kamal kand) and seed (dodi). The seed is used to make foxnut (makhana), which fetches a high price in the market. Avtar now manages a thriving lotus cultivation business, harvesting two crops each year—from February to May and from July to November. After the November harvest, he switches to potato, as by that time, the stagnate rain water gets dried to some extent. “Each acre requires around 200 kg of lotus roots, costing approximately Rs 8,000, plus another Rs 2,000 for transplanting labour. Fertilizer expenses, including DAP and traditional manure (desi rudi), is

an additional Rs 12,000 to 15,000. However, the most significant expense is labour for the lotus stem harvest, which costs around Rs 50,000 to Rs 60,000 per acre as from one acre, 50 to 60 quintals (5000 to 6000 kg) of stem is harvested and after grading, it is sold between Rs 20 and Rs 80 per Kg,” Avtar says. After deducting all expenses including rent, he earns over Rs 2 lakh per acre from the lotus stems and an additional Rs 30,000 to Rs 35,000 from lotus seeds, Avtar says, adding that some farmers even sell the flower if they have to pay rent of the land. In Punjab, white and pink varieties of lotus is grown. Avtar isn’t the only one thriving in lotus farming. Major Singh and Manjit Singh from Ferozepur have also been cultivating lotus stem for over a decade. Avtar adds that now several farmers in Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts have been farming lotus as there are several low lying areas located along the banks of the local rivulets and rivers. “Lotus farming requires a lot of water and waterlogged lands are perfect for this. Farmers with stagnant water on their fields can turn them into gold mine by shifting to lotus farming,” Avtar says. Simran Singh, Horticulture Development Officer in Ferozepur, says that more farmers are recognising the potential of lotus farming in waterlogged areas unsuitable for other crops in Ferozepur. “Presently, around 600 to 700 acres in Ferozepur are under lotus cultivation, with the produce reaching markets across India by train, road, and even air. According to experts, lotus stem has several nutritional benefits. Its woody, crunchy texture is versatile for various dishes. Rich in potassium, lotus stem can help reduce bad cholesterol, combat inflammation, aid digestion, and manage stress. With the growing market demand and the suitability of waterlogged lands for this crop, lotus farming has emerged as a profitable and sustainable option for farmers in Ferozepur,” he says. Avtar adds that beyond the aesthetic appeal, lotus farming has proven lucrative, as there is a high demand for lotus flowers and seeds in the cosmetic, medicinal, food industries and farmers can further diversify by selling the seeds for foxnut.

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