

'Miracle tree' has spread its roots

□ Relief groups around the world turn to a Wichita organization to learn about the drumstick tree.

BY ANNIE CALOVICH
The Wichita Eagle

The beat of the drumstick tree is reverberating far beyond the confines of the old Field Elementary School in Wichita, home of Trees for Life.

Five years after the nonprofit group took its campaign for the drumstick tree to 20 villages in India, the "miracle tree" that helps provide nutrients to people in Third World countries is beginning to be known in wider, more influential circles.

The Los Angeles Times featured the tree in a far-ranging story in March, and it was picked up by newspapers across the country. Former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young has latched on to the tree's cause. And Trees for Life's phones have been ringing with inquiries from as far away as France.

The group hopes to capitalize on the publicity to spread the news of the tree throughout the world.

The drumstick tree (envision sticks used for beating drums, not chicken or turkey legs dangling from the branches) is a recycler's dream: Every part is edible, from the bark to the leaves to the roots to the seeds. The leaves especially provide vitamins desperately lacking in diets in poor countries.

The leaves can, for example, save the lives and eyesight of children who are otherwise left open to disease because of a deficiency in vitamin A.

The tree's attributes also make it a philanthropist's dream. It grows quickly and easily in poor soil. Its leaves, similar to spinach, can be incorporated seamlessly into common

dishes such as lentil stew. Its seeds can purify water and have antibiotic qualities.

One of the better-known people taking up the tree's cause is Young, United Nations ambassador and new president of the National Council of Churches. When he was in the hospital recently, he asked people to spend money on drumstick-tree seeds for the poor instead of on flowers for him.

One arm of the National Council of Churches wants to have an international conference devoted to the tree and to study how the tree can improve the lives of Africans who have AIDS.

Roots in Wichita

But before a group headed by someone with a famous name took up the drumstick, Trees for Life was already championing it.

The group was founded in 1984 by businessman Balbir Mathur to increase the number of food-bearing trees in impoverished countries. The drumstick tree, native to India, like Mathur, is right up this group's alley.

About 10 years ago scientific research backed up Indian folklore that the drumstick tree's leaves are incredibly valuable as a food source, Mathur said.

"It's a tremendous tonic," he said.

Trees for Life made it a project to try to communicate that value to 40,000 people in 20 remote villages in India in 1995. A year later, a study revealed that 84 percent of the people were eating the leaves at least three times a week, compared with 30 percent before the program started.

Villagers helped design the program, getting the message out through such vehicles as plays in schools and cooking demonstrations for women.



Courtesy Photo

The drumstick tree, shown growing in India, produces edible leaves and pods that look like sticks used for beating a drum.

Since then, many new trees have been planted in India. Another campaign, with colorful posters in the Hindi language, is reaching 5,000 more villages in India.

Now that the likes of the Los Angeles Times and Young have given the tree wider exposure, "we are bracing for an avalanche of requests for information," Mathur said.

Trees for Life has developed a new CD-ROM that includes stories of how the drumstick tree has saved and improved lives, recipes for cooking with it, how to grow it, ways to publicize it. One of the disk's uses will be in schools in India as they get computers.

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Mike Shepherd/The Wichita Eagle

"We are bracing for an avalanche of requests for information," Balbir Mathur says about the drumstick tree. He has worked through his organization, Trees for Life, for years to get the nutrient-packed tree into the yards and diets of people in Third World countries.

TREE

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Gauging nutritional value

Some people are even growing the tree in this country.

The tree, whose botanical name is *Moringa oleifera* (its other nickname is horseradish tree because its roots can be used as a substitute for horseradish), is a tropical plant that can be grown in colder areas only as an annual. And that's just what Melvin Epp, botanist at the Center for the Improvement of Human Functioning, is doing in Wichita.

Epp notes a difference in the nutritional value attributed to the drumstick tree by the Department of Agriculture and by Trees for Life. While the lower vitamin content noted by the USDA is high enough to merit growing and eating the tree, he says, the center wants to test the leaves to see the results when the tree is grown here.

No matter what happens as a result of the drumstick tree publicity, Trees for Life's goal remains the same: to get the tree into the back yards of the poor in the developing world. And it doesn't expect to rely on governments to do that but on the grass roots, starting in Wichita.

"People can join hands, come up with ideas for how it can be distributed," Mathur says.

In the face of tremendous malnourishment, the tree is a wonderfully simple occurrence of nature that doesn't require foreign aid, Mathur says.

"The only thing lacking is how to communicate it to the people who need to know."

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For more information about the drumstick tree

To find out more about the drumstick tree from Trees for Life, contact Curtis Bryant by calling 945-6929 e-mailing info@treesforlife.org or writing Trees for Life, 3006 W. St. Louis, Wichita, KS 67203.

To buy seeds, write Jim Johnson, Seedman, 3421 Bream St., Gautier, MS 39553, call (800) 336-2064 or visit the web site seedman.com.

Web sites sponsored by these people and organizations also have information about the drumstick tree:

- Trees for Life: www.treesforlife.org
- Mark Olsen, a researcher who has hunted down all the species of the tree: hoya.mobot.org/gradstudents/olson/moringahome.html
- The University of Leicester in Britain: www.le.ac.uk/engineering/staff/Sutherland/moringa/moringa.htm
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture: www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/cgi-bin/nut_search.pl?horseradish



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