

# Teaching the art of climbing very tall trees

## Manpower shortage in arecanut plantations prompts Campco to start training school

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It takes a special sort of skill, and more than a modicum of courage, to bring millions of Indians their alkaloid fix of choice - the areca or betel nut. Chewed - either on its own, or preferably wrapped in a betel leaf - for millennia all over South and South-East Asia for its mild high, lack of demand is not a real problem for arecanut growers. Meeting the demand is.

The areca palm grows to a height of over 20 metres (over 60 feet) and the trunk is just 10-16 cm wide. And once at the top, the climber has to leap from tree-top to tree-top to cover all the trees in one area. On a windy day, even watching an arecanut climber at work can be scary.

Not surprisingly, the

number of people willing to take this up as a profession is coming down, despite the pay going up as high as ₹1,500 for half a day's work. Growers estimate that the number of skilled areca climbers has halved over the past decade alone.

The dearth of skilled climbers to go up the trees and spray fungicides is also a key factor in the increase in fruit rot disease, which threatens Karnataka's annual production of over 4 lakh tonnes. To tackle the growing scarcity of skilled workers in arecanut plantations, Karnataka's Central Arecanut and Cocoa Marketing and Processing Cooperative (Campco) is planning to set up a training centre to impart skills training to farmers and farm workers in arecanut tree climbing.

Shankaranarayana Bhat K,



A group of farmers at Thirthahalli in Shivamogga district undergo a training programme in arecanut tree climbing

Vice-President of Campco, told *BusinessLine* that though efforts are being made to mechanise these operations with the help of drones and other equipment, they are no match for skilled workers.

### Training camp

After observing a farmer-organised training camp in Thirthahalli, Shivamogga district, recently, Campco has decided to conduct its first "skill development" programme by the end of

November in one location. Based on the response, the cooperative may conduct such programmes in other arecanut-growing locations.

The goal is to prepare a cadre of expert arecanut tree climbers.

Provision of adequate safety measures and gear will be an integral part of the programme, Bhat said. In addition to this, steps will be taken to introduce accident insurance cover and blood grouping. The candidates will also get a stipend.