

Introduction of Commercially Important Willow Species During Early 20th Century – A Boon to Kashmiri Artisans

BL Puttoo

118, Apna Vihar, Jammu 180010, Jammu and Kashmir, India (email: puttooobl@rediffmail.com)

Abstract

Willows have been growing in Kashmir valley and other adjoining temperate areas of India since time immemorial. The willow constituted an important tree species to mankind in view of its multipurpose usage. Willows are easy to grow under moist habitats having adequate sunshine. Historical facts relating to planting of willows by Guru Nanak Dev Ji in Leh, and by other personalities elsewhere and also willow wood footwear used by saints and rishis (sages) of Kashmir treated as relics are presented.

Introduction of wicker and bat willows from England during early 20th century and their multiplication in suitable areas of Kashmir valley acted as a boon to the willow-based cottage industry. Intensification of willow culture in specified belts by Jammu and Kashmir Forest Department during early periods to cater the fuel needs of Srinagar and other towns till the introduction of LPG as a cooking medium and subsequent use of willow wood for box-making and packing of fruits for export has been elaborated. Traditional practices adopted for willow cultivation, the existing germplasm, pests, diseases, and abiotic factors that are considered detrimental for quality bat wood production in the recent past have been listed. Current scenario and efforts made for restoring the past glory of Kashmir bat willow industry have been discussed.

Much before the term social forestry that encompasses farm, community, extension, and agroforestry was conceived in 1976 (<http://edugreen.teri.res.in/explore/forestry/social.htm>), willows (*Salix* spp.) have been planted by the farming community in Kashmir valley and other adjoining

temperate areas. It readily fitted into the agroclimatological niche to serve its present objectives. Extensive planting of willow in the past perhaps has been preferred because of its fast growing nature, easy method of vegetative propagation through cuttings that root readily in moist soil irrespective of age.