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Lowly Malunggay Takes a Big Leap in Ilocos town



Pastor Adriano Piza and his malunggay leaves planted at the back of the malunggay processing plant.



Local neighborhood help in the processing of malunggay leaves.

Sarrat, Ilocos Norte- The Ilocanos love for green leafy veggies like malunggay (*moringa oleifera*) is transforming this town as the biggest processor of crushed and powdered malunggay with a huge demand in the global market.

Now with a more efficient and state-of-the art drying technology

The Department of Science and Technology thru the Small Enterprise Upgrading Program (SETUP) gave as fund support for technology acquisition to the Global Moringa Development Corporation (GMDC) in cooperation with the Ilocos Norte Marunggay Growers Cooperative here, this lowly malunggay known for its medicinal and health benefits is more than ready to cater to a larger market here and abroad.

A fabricated drying oven, pulverizer, hygrometer and moisture meter worth almost one million pesos (P861,500) were delivered and tested at the Malunggay processing plant in Barangay San Joaquin, Sarrat, Ilocos Norte to boost the cooperative's production of malunggay flakes and powder used as herbal tea, food supplement and fortifier among others.

Pastor Adriano Piza, president of GMDC said that from an average of 1.2 tons of malunggay leaves they are processing per month with their old dryers, Piza said they can now double or triple the output to produce at least 3 tons of malunggay crushed and powder per month with the new drying machine with a capacity of 100 kilos per batch for every three hours.

At present, the processing plant is equipped with at least three drying machines, two of which were given as a grant by the Department of Agriculture in cooperation with the Provincial Government of Ilocos Norte under the administration of Ilocos Norte Governor Ma. Imelda Marcos.

“The Jurassic (old) drying machine has a lower capacity of 35 kilos per batch which is why we could hardly beat the demand of the international market,” said Piza. He said a lot of companies from Europe, United States and the neighboring Asian Countries are looking for processed malunggay products for food and medicinal purposes yet they cannot deliver the required demand due to low technology and supply.

How it all started?

In 2008, Piza's daughter Unice Joy, initiated the project believing that processed malunggay products have a great potential in the market but her father was reluctant about it.

The 33-year old Unice worked for eight years at the Department of Agriculture- special projects of Biotechnology in Manila but she resigned and went home in Sarrat town to plant malunggay.

“Malunggay grows well in Ilocos region with low maintenance,” so she thought at a time when the DA was aggressive in promoting malunggay plantations in Mindanao. The seeds planted in Mindanao however came from Ilocos.

It was in 2006 when people became more conscious about health and organic products. Malunggay also gained popularity among natural drug advocates when malunggay has been included among the seven natural ingredients including chichirika, lagundi, sambong, banaba, luyang dilaw and madre de cacao. The essential oils of these plants are known to prevent illnesses though there had been no therapeutic claims yet.

Traditional medicine experts has proven that malunggay lowers blood pressure, cures headache, stop bleeding from shallow cut and an alternative for bacterial and fungal skin complaints, anti-inflammatory gastric ulcers, diarrhea and malnutrition.

Malunggay pods are also used as dewormers and good for treating liver and spleen problems. Its oil extracts may also be effective for arthritis, rheumatism, gout, cramps, STD, boils and Urinary Tract Infections.

Aside from that, this green leafy veggie boasts of many health and medicinal benefits and it is also considered as a zero waste plant because wastes generated from the Malunggay processing plant in Sarrat town is being bought by private companies for feeds and organic fertilizer.



Jahmai Grade of DOST Ilocos Norte demonstrates how to use the newly-acquired moisture meter to workers at the Malunggay processing plant in San Joaquin, Sarrat, Ilocos Norte



Unice Joy Piza and Jonathan Viernes, provincial director of DOST-Ilocos Norte with the newly-acquired malunggay dryer.

“Muntik na kaming magkasiraan,” said Unice referring to her 61 year-old father, who is also a pastor of the Bible Baptist church when she proceeded with the establishment of a research and demonstration farm and set up a 654 sqm. processing plant along the national highway in San Joaquin village, Sarrat, Ilocos Norte.

At that time, Unice started with a more than one hectare malunggay demo farm with at least 25 local individuals who believe in her idea.

Like anybody who is starting up a business venture, there are unpredictable circumstances where it is beyond your control. But Unice was determined to prove her father she is on the right track.

Though malunggay tree is self-reliant and requires low maintenance, her father narrated they have wasted so much effort and capital when malunggay cuttings were planted at a wrong time. And when they are processing the leaves, there was a time when about 600 kilos of processed malunggay were damaged because of a bacteria content found at the vault of the pulverizer. But this was remedied and resulted to at least a break even cost of the input. All these did not stop her.

To date, the Ilocos Norte malunggay growers cooperative founded and personally managed by Unice maintains at least 22 hectares now of rain-fed malunggay plantations found in the hilly lands of Ilocos Norte.

These used to be idle lots but now it is generating jobs and income to farmers including their immediate family members who are also being hired when harvesting and processing malunggay leaves.

Malunggay grows well in sandy loam soil but it can also be planted in other soil types,

Piza said saying even malunggay trees are planted along the national highway in Ilocos region or use as fence of Ilocano households where they also buy from them should they meet the required time the harvested malunggay leaves should be at the processing plant as part of their strict quality control.

Moving on from a research and demo farm to a transition of expanding the processing plant’s capacity to beat the international market, both father and daughter committed to lead the way and make other malunggay growers including their household members benefit from it in terms of personal healthcare and job generation.

To date, the Sarrat malunggay processing plant with at least 24 regular workers is eyeing to grow the plantation to at least 100 hectares excluding other individuals who are selling fresh malunggay leaves to them pegged at P10 per kilo. Aside from processing malunggay leaves, they also produce quality seeds for oil extract to manufacturing companies.

In five years time, the Piza family aims to generate about 1,500 direct and indirect workers and maybe put Ilocos Norte in the world map of malunggay export.

“This is what I want to do—to help people who are in need of work and make them profitable. If it is your passion, we can always move forward,” said Unice who is now ready to settle and grow her own family now that the seeds she has sown about five years ago bear fruits.

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