AGRICULTURE Weekly issue

VETIVER HANDICRAFT, AN UNEXPLORED SECTOR

Anisi Qereqeretabua (left) and Naina Rokocama (right) with crafts made from vetiver

Every little girl growing up in the village will never forget the memory of returning home to their mothers and grandmothers busily weaving mats with sounds of the kettle boiling and a transistor radio playing the afternoon announcements, heard in the background.

Those were the moment's 47-year-old Anisi Maramabiu Qereqeretabua of Nadaro village, of the District of Vugalei, Tailevu recalls as her first introduction to weaving mats out of Pandanus leaves.

"As a little girl aged around nine-years, I would arrive home to the familiar smells of Pandanus leaves either hanging to be dried or coiled and piled at the corner ready for weaving," she said.

"I also remember my mother Melita Tinaitamana, who is now 70-years-old, weaving mats made from Pandanus leaves and fans from coconut leaves," she said.

"Weaving is her hobby and her finished products would warm the floor of our home and a treasured possession during traditional functions," said Anisi.

"I would sit with her when I was in the mood or when I was tired of playing with my friends. When I reached Form 3, I decided to commit myself to the art of weaving."

Anisi was a young girl attending Ratu Sukuna Memorial School in Nabua, who apart from being educated in the academia was also knowledgeable in the art of weaving.

"As the only girl in a family of three boys, it occurred to me one day, if my mother was to pass on, no one would teach me how to weave," she said.

"So I learnt and I am glad that my mother taught me because it has helped me today."

Her craft was her ticket to marrying her sweetheart, Acura Sabaria of Vadrai village, in Nakelo, Tailevu.

"I was married in 1998 and wove mats as a hobby for our home. I was doing this until 2015 when I discovered the importance of vetiver leaves," she said.

Vetiver (Chrysopogon Zizanioides) is a perennial bunchgrass of the family Poaceae. It can grow to up to 150 centimeters (5 ft.) high and forms clumps as wide. The stems are tall and leaves are long, thin, and rather rigid with brownish-purple flowers.

The plant helps to stabilize soil and protects it against erosion, as well as safeguards fields against pests and weeds.

Vetiver has favorable qualities for animal feed, from its roots oil is extracted and used for manufacturing cosmetics while its fibrous properties make it useful for handicrafts and weaving ropes.

Women learn from other women in the village and it is from a fellow relative Naina Rokocama that Anisi learnt the importance of vetiver for weaving.

"I attribute my vetiver weaving knowledge to Naina and thank her for her time to teach, share and pass her knowledge to us the women of Nadaro," she said.

"I wove my first set of handicraft like fruit baskets, doormats, plates mat and accessories baskets, out of vetiver in 2015. I will always be grateful that I learnt from my mother the art of weaving and I found that it wasn't difficult at all."

Anisi has grown in her knowledge and skills to the point that she was invited to display her artwork at the 2015 Women's Expo held at the Suva foreshore.

"This was an eye opening experience for me and during that expo I was the only woman that brought my handicraft made out of vetiver," she said.

"I was so proud of myself. Others had theirs made from the usual pandanus and coconut leaves."

While the vetiver-made handicraft sector remain unexplored, Anisi continues weaving both pandanus and vetiver with the hope that this particular would gain some interest soon.

"The plant is exclusively unique as it plays all different roles. Compared to pandanus, the leaves require minimum attention to dry and be ready for weaving," she said.

"It would be exciting to have a market that we can supply to as most people are not aware of how strong and good vetiver is or how long it can last."

As experienced as she is in weaving, Anisi laments on the differences between vetiver and the pandanus leaves.

"As beautiful as the end result could be, there are factors that also needs to be considered. We spend long hours sitting and weaving and sometimes this results in back and knee complications," she said.

"We love doing this because it generates income to our households and our neatness is portrayed in the end result," said Anisi.

"Vetiver compared to pandanus takes only two days to dry and another two days to wrap well before it is ready to be used for weaving.

"With Pandanus leaves, the steps to acquiring the right colour and texture takes quite a lot of time from harvesting to cutting off the sharp edges, then coiled and boiled for a day before it is placed outside to dry in the sun. After this step then only can weaving start. Drying it out in the sun can take about three days or a week, if the weather is raining."

Because of her experience, Anisi willingly shares her knowledge to nearby women's group such as those in Logani, Sote, and also conducts training for the Girl Guide camp at Viria Primary School.

"I taught screen printing and handicraft-making and in return, I also learn new things from the women too and return and pass on the new knowledge to the women of Nadaro.

"We all know the hardships we are facing today and these are a few things you can engage in to help you make use of the resources around you as well as develop the talent you just might have," she said.

Anisi Qereqeretabua weaving from vetiver grass.

A THIN LINE AGAINST EROSION-VETIVER

LRPD Officer Seremaia Tabuatalei planting Vetiver along the Koronivia road side.

HISTORY

Soil conservation practices are used to prevent soil degradation and maintain good soil health. It is to prevent soil erosion, soil overuse and water contamination. There are various measures that are used to maintain soil health, and prevent the above harms to soil. These practices include: mulching, contour farming, Agro-forestry, intercropping, alley cropping, and vetiver hedgerows.

Vetiver Establishment is a Technology on its own. Since 1987, technology has been tested in India, China, Philippines, Indonesia, Nigeria, Madagscar, Brazil and Australia. In Trinidad used to stabilize rock based roadside. In Fiji research was carried out in Waibau, Naitasiri from 1987-2000. This project was initiated by Land Use Planning Section in collaboration with IBSRAM. In the next decade environmental issues will dominate the agricultural and natural resource sectors.

DESCRIPTION OF VETIVER

The plants grow in large dumps from a much branched "spongy" root stock with erect 0.5 - 1.5m high. Leaf blades are relatively stiff, long and narrow up to 75cm long, less than 8mm wide.

VETIVER HEDGEROW AT WORK

- The leaves and stem slow the silt loaded runoff and cause it to deposit the silt behind the plant.
- Binds the soil beneath the plant to a depth of up to three meters
- Forming a dense underground curtains that follows the contour of the land.
- Roots prevent gullying, veiling and tunneling.

WHY VETIVER GRASS IS AN IDEAL PLANT?

- It has strong fibrous root system that penetrates and binds the soil to a depth of up to three meters and can withstand the effects of tunneling and cracking.
- Requires minimal maintenance
- It will not become a weed
- Protects the plant against fire and overgrazing because crown is below the surface.
- Maintain soil fertility

OTHER PRACTICAL USES FOR VERTIVER GRASS

- Protecting riverbanks
- Nurturing trees
- Stabilizing tree crops
- Vetiver as a mulch
- Protecting roadsides
- Stabilizing gullies
- Stabilizing wasteland areas
- Protecting bridges
- Protecting irrigation canals
- Protecting dams

Research done in Waibau from 1992 - 2000

Average tropical countries soil loss per year is13.5 tonnes/ha/yr. Soil loss from research site was 50 tonnes/ha/yr. With hedgerows of vetiver only one tonne of soil is loss in a hectare per year.