

## Neera taps into organic trend

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A neera technician tapping sap from a coconut palm at the Sheryas farm of the Kollam Latin Catholic Diocese.— Photo: C. Suresh Kumar

*Shortage of neera technicians for tapping remains an issue*

Neera, unfermented sweet sap from coconut flowers, is turning out to be the latest organic food trend in the State.

The country's first neera plant, Kaipuzha Coconut Producer Company Limited (KCPCL), was launched by Chief Minister Oommen Chandy at Thevalakara in February.

Though the company has firm orders, lack of neera technicians to tap the sap has come in the way of the firm meeting the demand. At present, about 300 litres of raw material reaches the plant a day.

Only 60 people had been trained in tapping the sap in the district, company officials said, adding that at least 1,000 technicians would be needed considering the demand.

### KCPCL outlets

They said the KCPCL served two outlets in Kollam city and two in Alappuzha.

The company was unable to meet an order from the United Kingdom to supply 30,000 litres of neera a month.

Though a distributor for the domestic market had been finalised, supply had not started yet. About 600 people were being trained as neera technicians in the district and the supply situation would improve once they joined the job.

The Shreyas farm of the Kollam Latin Catholic Diocese has successfully cashed in on the initiative. Director of the farm Fr. George Ribeira said the 180 coconut palms there fetched a revenue of Rs.18,000 every two months. Now, from 60 palms given for neera tapping, the farm was earning more than Rs.1.15 lakh a month.

Chief neera technician Anil Kumar said on an average a coconut palm could yield three litres of neera sap a day but there were trees with a yield of eight litres. A farmer would get Rs.90 a day from a palm that produced three litres.

"A neera technician gets Rs.30 a litre as wages for 450 litres a month. When the quantity goes beyond 450 litres, the wage will be Rs.42 a litre," he said.

Mr. Anil said on an average a neera technician earned about Rs.15,000 a month. But there were many earning more than Rs.22,000, some of them women.

Neera technicians are covered by provident fund and are eligible for ESI benefits. They are beneficiaries of the Neera Toddy Welfare Fund Board and eligible for pension. Each technician has an insurance cover of Rs.2 lakh.