

One, two, cha cha cha

Canadian NGO takes organic Assam chai abroad; teaches small-scale tea growers sustainable agriculture

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coins" which are processed inside a section of fresh green bamboo. A grower in Lakhimpur, Assam has developed an ingenious technique for crushing his tea. He uses the "dheki" a wooden tool traditionally used for husking rice and he dries his tea over an open fire. His tea has a slightly smoky flavour to it, which is popular with some tea drinkers in the West.

This has been made possible by the efforts of a

workers and their families in Nicaragua, Central America. So they wanted to pursue the same initiative for small tea growers in Assam.

Most growers Peggy first visited, thought that growing organic tea meant using a different kind of pesticide or chemical. Peggy and her team wanted to tell them about alternative methods to pesticides and chemicals. They also realised that the farmers needed access to small-scale equipment so that it could enable them to process their own teas.

Peggy worked with several organisations including the Tea Board of India, Assam Agriculture University, NEADS (North East Affected Area Development Society) and in 2005, found a group of people in Digboi, who wanted to set up a resource centre and demonstration garden so that their ideas could be put to practice.

The project was named Adarsh Seuj

Prakalpa and is partnered by The Digboi Rotary Club. Peggy and her team has been given two acres of land belonging

small Canadian NGO that was founded by Peggy Carswell in 2003 to promote sustainable agricultural practices in Assam. Sustainable agriculture stresses on the ability of a farm to produce as much crop as it can, for an indefinite period, without sapping the natural ecosystem of the place. The organisation is working with a few small-scale tea growers to produce organic tea. Some of the producers that Peggy and her team are working with are producing green teas, others are producing orthodox and CTC style tea.

Peggy came to Assam as a traveler in 1998 and later returned in 1999 to find a source of organic and fairly traded tea grown by small tea producers. Another NGO in her home country Canada, had a small, fair trade organic coffee project that was helping them raise funds for



(Above) A Singpho woman dries fresh tea leaves; (Right) Members of the NGO that is helping tea growers in Assam



Wonderland. People donate items that the guests purchase and the items go to the highest bidder. The finished tea product has been displayed at this event and has received considerable applause.

Peggy though has stated that she is not vigorously promoting the cultivation of organic tea as there is a sizeable amount of land already under cultivation. To bring a land under cultivation means clearing forest land that leads to the loss of wildlife habitat.

There are recurrent hurdles that Peggy and her team of enthusiastic volunteers face. Peggy says, "There's so much great work being done by organisations in southern India in the field of sustainable or organic crop production and preservation of local seeds but little information or support makes its way to Assam. Fertile

Ground would be grateful to any organisation who is involved with sustainable agriculture for their help."

THERE is something magical in drinking a cup of tea that is brewed well. The rising aroma that wafts across the room while it is being prepared, the rich golden brown liquid while it is poured out into the cup, the flavour that overwhelms your taste buds with that first sip and the satisfied smile on your lips that remains — drinking a cup of tea is truly an experience that holds its own.

The art of drinking tea is as much a point in good grooming as it is in growing a good crop of the same. Assam has long been synonymous with a few things that have almost been made into its state symbols. One is the endangered one-horned rhino; the other is tea. With Assam leading as the largest producers of tea in India, there are some very fine and unique teas under production. The Singpho community, a small tribal community in Assam, which has been credited with introducing the British to tea bushes in Assam, is producing their traditional "phalap" an Oolong style tea, which is golden in colour and semi-fermented. They also produce "tea

