

SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

The Story of the East Bali Poverty Project **THE POWER OF VETIVER GRASS**

BY BALI BOHEME

Hanging on my kitchen wall is an intricately woven and plaited 'corn-dolly'. This is something that I learnt to make for myself many years ago as a child, because each summer I used to spend part of my holidays on my uncle's farm in the English County of Somerset. I was always there for the wheat harvest and eagerly participated in some of the traditional activities that took place during this exciting time in August, and this included making corn dollies from the wheat grass stems to decorate the produce that later adorned the church at the Harvest Festival. However, the corn-dolly in my kitchen is not made from corn, or indeed wheat stem, and certainly didn't originate in a wheat field in England. It is actually made from Vetiver grass and it proudly bears the name of a disadvantaged Balinese child, from an isolated community on the slopes of Mount Agung, who was taught how to make it during a handicraft lesson at school.

The incredible properties of Vetiver now play a major role in the work of the East Bali Poverty Project; improving the lives of these previously uneducated children living in remote mountain villages. If you read the 'Magical Vetiver' edition of 'Sustainable Solutions' published recently, you will know that the quick growing grass has incredible bio-engineering properties and has been used to prevent soil movement and stop the erosion of the gravelly dirt tracks and steep farmland in the region. Its roots and leaves have a pesticidal property and are being used to improve the volcanic soil in the organic vegetable plots where the children are being taught essential organic farming.

One of the remarkable things about Vetiver is the speed of the regeneration of the new shoots. Transplanting the grass to protect fresh areas requires careful cutting of the stems and roots to ensure optimum chance for the rapid growth of the new slips. Nothing is wasted because the cut grass and roots then have many uses, the best known being the extraction of aromatic oil from the roots. This oil is used in the production of perfume and also contains healing properties. Vetiver Oil was first produced in Indonesia after the Dutch introduced the plant into the country in the early 1920s. It was grown in Garut, where the land and sandy soil is similar to the arid mountainous regions in Bali and could not support crops. The Garut communities were taught how to extract the oil by boiling the Vetiver roots in huge vats for 24 hours prior to distilling the oil.

The roots are also used in the processing of skin care products, as insect and rodent repellents, and for making screens, blinds, fans, hats and handbags. The leaves, meanwhile, are used for roof thatching, mulching, floor coverings in stables, animal fodder, compost for mushroom culture, and handicrafts such as ropes, mats and baskets.

Handicrafts made from the roots are already well known in Indonesia but handicrafts made from the actual grass are not yet sold here. There is however, one exception...those made by the children who have been taught these skills by the staff of the village hamlet schools set up by the East Bali Poverty

a new avenue of creativity. Secondly, the youngsters learn the importance of recycling all waste products. Finally, by introducing these skills to the children and later to the youth and adults, with emphasis placed on women's groups, a new avenue opens for their eventual self-reliance, and the ultimate goal of sustainable economic development for these remote communities. The villagers will be trained to form co-operatives ensuring that the tutoring staff of the EBPP are always up to date on the designs that the market requires both for domestic sales and export.

Through extensive research trials in the field and by monitoring, measuring and evaluating the performance of Vetiver in different land conditions, - mainly in the prevention of soil erosion and landslips, together with the creation of verges and gutters to prevent road erosion, the EBPP are now able to help others to benefit from the grass. They have developed their own Vetiver nurseries in the mountains and in the Denpasar area, and have already supplied significant quantities of the grass to a number of hotels, companies, and individuals, with amazing results. Vetiver has been used for permaculture in Jatiluwih, stabilisation of soil in hotel gardens high above the steep river gorges in the Ubud area, and prevention of erosion along the beaches of Padang Galak. It has even been successfully utilised in the hindrance of snakes and rats. In the case of the beach project, it was essential to find a solution that provided rapid growth, both above and below soil, to act as a barrier against erosion from the sea. Therefore, as well as being available in single slips, Vetiver is obtainable as mature plants, in polybags, already with an extensive root system dur to being fertilised and maintained in one of the EBPP nurseries for at least three months.

Anyone purchasing the grass can be secure in the knowledge that all of the money is going directly back into the project.

The Vetiver grass dolly hanging in my kitchen is one of many that has been sold so far by the East Bali Poverty Project at various fund raising events, bazaars and flea markets. It reminds me not just of my own youth when I played in the golden wheat fields of southwest of England, but also of other young children, sons and daughters of impoverished Balinese farmers who have none of the privileges that I took for granted. These youngsters previously had neither the opportunity nor the motivation to be creative. For the first time in their lives they are now learning about self-expression and self worth.

If you would like more information about The East Bali Poverty Project, or would like to make a donation, please call 0361 419741 Or email: info@eastbalipovertyproject.org Homepage: www.eastbalipovertyproject.org