

Time to re-affirm our ties with neem

As Ugadi approaches, the new year brings with it a renewed affirmation of our connection with the neem tree.

Popular across India, the neem is planted for its shade, and medicinal properties. Across Bengaluru, we can see sacred platforms or kattes with peepal and neem trees, or a banyan and neem, often with snake idols placed beneath. Such kattes can be found even in the busiest and most congested areas providing shade to people, birds and animals.

All parts of the tree are useful. The twigs are used for brushing: my grandfather who used only a neem stick to brush his teeth, lived till the age of 92, retaining all his teeth. Neem leaves are used to treat disorders of the skin and stomach, breathing difficulties and diabetes. The leaves and fruits are also used as insect repellents, and substitutes for pesticides. In home gardens and slums, we find that neem is a particularly preferred species for planting.

Neem has a long history in Bengaluru. Paintings by British landscape artists who visited the city in the 1790s depict kattes, with what look very much like neem trees in outline. Neem was widespread in Malleswaram area, with one street being named Margosa Road (Margosa, English name for neem tree). At one point, the tree was so widespread that people of older areas such as Malleswaram, Basavana-

gudi and Jayanagar could pluck leaves and flowers from the trees on

the road, reaching across the compound wall of a stranger's home.

During Ugadi, neem flowers and leaves are used in dishes such as gojju and pachadi, with jaggery as a sweetener to balance the bitterness. This is the time to look forward to the rains, and celebrate the beginning of a new year, filled with the sweet and bitter flavours of life. It is also time to celebrate the history of our Garden City, and the heritage of the trees that give it its character.



MY OPINION

HARINI NAGENDRA |

PROFESSOR OF SUSTAINABILITY,
AZIM PREMJI UNIVERSITY