



Farming the Organic Miracle

The Wondrous
Abaco Neem

By Diane Phillips

In the hills of central India, a broad-leaved evergreen tree called the neem is revered for its healing powers. Said to cure everything from bed bugs to malaria, and to soothe everything but a broken heart, neem is referred to as the “village pharmacy.” A Western forestry expert goes so far as to say it is “tailor-made for combating the serious problems confronting mankind today.”

Neem may not be up to combating all the modern world’s serious problems. It stops short of eliminating hostilities among warring factions, but when it comes to healing what ails you, neem may be just what the doctor ordered.

In Abaco, you don’t need a doctor to order the cure. Neem is organically grown, processed, packaged and certified, perhaps the first organically certified product internationally distributed from The Bahamas. The company doing it is called Abaco Neem, the brainchild of Nick Miaoulis (pictured), who first encountered a neem tree and its natural healing powers during a horticulture show at his alma mater, the University of Florida in Gainesville, in 1993. Miaoulis, then in the clothing business in Abaco, was fascinated.

“Watching people try on clothes every day, I could see what bad eating habits had done to the Bahamian population,” he said. It was that in-your-face experience with unfit shoppers that drew him to what appeared to be Mother Nature’s magical formula. He took a brochure from the show, asked about research. Everything he learned whetted his appetite to learn more. Within a year, like a man driven, he had leased 120 acres from the Bahamian government, not far from Marsh Harbour on the island of Great Abaco. He was about to become a farmer.

The first crop nearly didn’t make it.

“We brought in 8,000 seeds out of India and got stopped in Washington by the Department of Agriculture, even though we had all the paperwork,” he said. He was all but frantic. Back in Abaco, there were 8,000 waiting pots ready to receive the precious cargo, but with each passing day, the 2-6 week survival rate of the seeds was diminishing. Finally, approval was granted and the container continued its shipping journey.

Only 10% of the imported seeds, which take approximately three to three and a half years to go from seed to fruit-bearing tree, survived. Today, there are 5,320

trees on the Abaco Neem farm, another 440 in a nursery. It's a constant process of re-forestation.

The farm is so productive it takes a crew of up to 18 to harvest the seed from late August to the end of January. For two months following the harvest, oil is pressed to produce a wide range of products—soaps, salves, lotions, shampoos, creams and a tea and extract are produced from the leaf. Production of goods takes place at the processing and retail center near the Marsh Harbour Airport. It is time-consuming, tedious and unlike the sprawling farm has more the feel of a cottage industry. Piles of seeds the size of a pencil-tip eraser are tumbled in an agitator. Every seed is hand-peeled, passed through a Taby press that separates the precious oil from a solid substance which becomes neem seed cake, something that looks like ground granola and is used as a fertilizer and soil enhancer to nurture the trees that produced it. The farm also grows aloe and coconut trees which are used in their products.

The market is sitting up and taking notice. Beyond gaining popularity among the standard health food, soy milk and goat cheese crowd, Abaco Neem is quietly gaining overall market share among a wider audience who believe its anti-bacterial, anti-viral, anti-inflammatory, anti-fungal properties cures or ease symptoms of arthritis, diabetes, periodontal disease and ulcers. Neem has been known to build healthier teeth and gums. Abaco Neem oil has been used as a natural de-wormer on domestic pets and farm animals—pigs, goats, sheep and cattle. It

also protects them from fleas, ticks and other skin irritations.

Its properties appear to have the power to heal, erase, soothe and smooth, and more importantly, to improve general health and well-being.

For Abaco Neem's founder, a man who was once a clothier and now proudly calls himself a farmer and has developed a passion bordering on obsession with good health, he's convinced he is providing "the best neem oil in the world," thanks to a combination of factors—seaweed for natural fertilization, a good water table for perfect growing conditions and the ability to harvest with care.

"In poorer countries like India, they shake the trees and the fruit lays on the ground, sometimes for days," says Miaoulis. "But here we pick it right off the tree so it is always fresh."

And that may be part of the secret of the qualification for organic certification. A company called Quality Certification Services out of Gainesville checks their farm products and manufacturing procedures annually. The Neem Association and World Organization of Natural Medicine consider Abaco Neem's oil to being that of 'super high grade quality neem oil.' Ironically, what could be the world's most pure form of neem oil is growing on an island in the Northern Bahamas, once considered unfit for farming because of soil that was not as rich as other islands. 🌿



"We brought in 8,000 seeds out of India and got stopped in Washington by the Department of Agriculture, even though we had all the paperwork," he said. He was all but frantic.