

## Healthy Stevia – Sweetness, Health, and a New Opportunity in Agriculture

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In the present era, lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and heart disorders are increasing rapidly. Excess consumption of sugar is considered one of the major causes behind these problems. In such a situation, **Stevia**, a natural, safe, and zero-calorie sweetening medicinal plant. Stevia (*Stevia rebaudiana*) is known as a **superfood** in the fields of food technology, pharmaceuticals, and health science. For farmers in Maharashtra, stevia cultivation can become a **low-cost, high-profit, and sustainable crop** in the long term.

### Information about Stevia Plant

Stevia is originally a plant from **Paraguay in South America**, and its cultivation has been successfully started in India in recent years. It belongs to the **Asteraceae family** and is a perennial medicinal herb. The leaves of stevia contain natural sweet compounds called **stevioside and rebaudioside-A**. These compounds are about **200–300 times sweeter than sugar**, but they contain **no calories**. Therefore, stevia is considered a safe and effective alternative to sugar.



### Stevia as a Superfood and its Medicinal Importance

From a health point of view, stevia is highly beneficial. Since it does not increase blood glucose levels, it provides a safe sweetening option for diabetic patients. Because it has zero calories, it helps in **weight management** and shows positive effects in reducing obesity. Some studies indicate that stevia helps in **controlling blood pressure**, making it beneficial for heart health. Since it does not cause tooth decay like sugar, it is also considered safe for dental health. Stevia contains **antioxidant properties** that help reduce harmful free radicals in the body. Due to these benefits, the use of stevia is increasing in **diabetic foods, herbal drinks, nutraceuticals, and medicines**.



### Use in Food Technology and Pharmaceutical Industry

In the field of food technology, the use of stevia is increasing rapidly. Stevia is widely used as a sweetener in:

- diabetic biscuits
- sugar-free chocolates
- beverages
- bakery products
- herbal drinks

It is also used in **nutraceuticals, Ayurvedic medicines, and pharmaceutical products**. Due to increasing health awareness among consumers, **stevia-based products have high market demand**.

### Stevia Cultivation for Farmers in Maharashtra

The climate of Maharashtra is suitable for stevia cultivation. Stevia grows well in:

- Temperature: 15–30 °C
- Moderate rainfall
- Well-drained light to medium soil
- Soil pH: 6.0 – 7.5

Stevia cultivation can be successfully done in **Vidarbha, Marathwada, and Western Maharashtra**. Stevia cultivation is more successful when done using **cuttings or seedlings instead of seeds**, because seed germination is low. The suitable planting seasons are:

- February – March
- June – July

Proper spacing is necessary for good plant growth. Regular but moderate irrigation is required. Waterlogging should be avoided, as it may cause root rot. Use of **organic fertilizers** improves quality and reduces cost. Weed control is important in the initial stage, especially during the first **4050 days**. Stevia generally has **low pest and disease incidence**, but organic pesticides and biological methods are recommended for safe production.

### Harvesting, Yield, and Economic Benefits

The first harvest of stevia can be taken **3–4 months after planting**. Leaves should be harvested **before flowering**, because sweetness content is higher at this stage. Harvesting can be done **3–4 times per year**, providing regular income to farmers. After harvesting, leaves are dried in shade and stored, or sold directly to processing industries. With proper management, good yield of **dry leaves per hectare** can be obtained.

Since stevia is a medicinal plant, it has

- assured market demand
- relatively stable price
- good profit potential



### Conclusion

Stevia is not only a sugar substitute but also an important opportunity for health, food technology, and farmers' income growth. Considering the increasing diabetes problem, rising demand for sugar-free products, and expansion of the pharmaceutical industry, farmers in Maharashtra should adopt stevia cultivation as a superfood and medicinal crop. With proper technology, guidance, and market support, stevia cultivation can become a sustainable and profitable option for farmers.