Agri Articles
(e-Magazine for Agricultural Articles)
Volume: 06, Issue: 05 (SEP-OCT, 2026)
Available online at http://www.agriarticles.com
©Agri Articles, ISSN: 2582-9882

Beat The Heat: Soil Moisture Conservation Strategies for Tamil Nadu Farmers

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Rising summer temperatures, erratic monsoons and falling groundwater make soil moisture one of the most valuable resources on a Tamil Nadu farm. This article explains in simple terms how soil holds and loses water, and why hot, dry spells hurt crops. It then describes low-cost practices that help farmers hold on to every drop: mulching, organic matter addition, conservation tillage, field bunds and farm ponds, intercropping, timely weeding, and efficient irrigation. Used together, these practices lower water loss, protect soil life and steady yields in a warming climate.

Key words: soil moisture, mulching, organic matter, conservation tillage, drip irrigation, rainfed agriculture, Tamil Nadu, climate resilience

Introduction

A farmer in Ramanathapuram, Salem or Thoothukudi knows the feeling of a field in April: cracked ground, drooping leaves and a borewell that delivers less each year. Much of Tamil Nadu receives most of its rain in a few months, mainly from the northeast monsoon, and gets little rain for the rest of the year. Much of the state's cultivated land also depends on rainfall or limited irrigation. When temperatures climb above 38–40 °C, water evaporates from the soil surface and transpires from plant leaves much faster than rain or irrigation can replace it. The good news is that soil is a natural water bank, and farmers can improve how much it stores and how slowly it loses water. Moisture conservation does not always need expensive machines. Often it needs better timing, local materials and a clear understanding of how soil behaves. This article offers that understanding in plain language, followed by practical steps any farmer can try.

Understanding Soil Water in Simple Terms

Soil as a sponge: Soil is made of solid particles with small gaps (pores) between them. These pores hold air and water. After rain, water fills the pores. Some drains away quickly through large pores, and the rest clings to soil particles in small pores. This clinging water is what plant roots can use (Brady and Weil, 2016).

Texture matters. Sandy soils, common in parts of coastal and southern districts, drain fast and hold little water. Clay-rich soils, such as the black cotton soils of Coimbatore, Tiruppur and Thoothukudi regions, hold more water but release it slowly and crack when dry. Red loamy soils lie in between. Because texture cannot be changed, the best strategy is to improve the soil's structure and organic matter (Saxton and Rawls, 2006).

Three ways water leaves the field.

1. Evaporation from the bare soil surface, which is greatest under direct sun and wind.
2. Transpiration through plant leaves, which is needed for growth but is wasted when water is poorly managed.

3. Runoff and deep drainage during heavy rain, when water flows off the field or sinks below the root zone.

Together, evaporation and transpiration are called evapotranspiration, and the rate depends on temperature, wind, humidity and crop stage (Allen et al., 1998). In hot weather, a large part of the water applied to a field can be lost from the soil surface without ever helping the crop. Conservation practices target exactly these losses.

Why organic matter is the key: Organic matter acts like a sponge within a sponge. It helps soil particles bind into stable crumbs, improves pore structure, and raises the amount of plant-available water the soil can hold (Rawls et al., 2003). It also feeds soil microbes, which build further structure. This is why many conservation practices begin with feeding the soil.

Materials and Methods

This is a review-type popular article. It does not report a new field experiment. The content was prepared through the following steps.

Materials: Information was drawn from textbooks on soil physics and soil management, peer-reviewed research on mulching, tillage and water use efficiency, international guidelines on crop water requirement, and the crop production guidance issued by Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU). Government programmes supporting micro-irrigation were also considered.

Methods.

- Key moisture-loss pathways in hot, semi-arid conditions were identified.
- For each pathway, practices known to reduce loss were shortlisted.
- Practices were selected only if they are low-cost, use locally available material and suit smallholder farms in Tamil Nadu.
- Scientific explanations were rewritten in simple language, and the practical steps are given in the next section.

Procedure: Practical Moisture Conservation Strategies

Mulching: a cover for the soil

Mulch is any material spread on the soil surface. It shades the soil, cuts evaporation, keeps the root zone cooler and suppresses weeds that compete for water (Kader et al., 2017). Studies on crops such as groundnut and vegetables have reported better moisture retention and often higher yield under mulch (Ramakrishna et al., 2006).

How to do it:

- **Organic mulch:** use paddy straw, sugarcane trash, coconut husk or coir pith, dry leaves, or groundnut shells. Spread a layer of about 5–10 cm around plants, keeping it a little away from the stems to avoid rot.
- **Plastic mulch:** silver-black or black film suits high-value crops such as tomato, chilli, brinjal and watermelon, usually with drip lines under the film. Remove and dispose of used film properly rather than burning it.
- **Living mulch:** a low-growing, non-competitive cover crop between rows also shades the soil.
- Apply mulch when the soil is already moist, ideally right after irrigation or rain.

Build soil organic matter

Because organic matter raises water-holding capacity, it is a long-term investment against heat and drought (Lal, 2015).

How to do it:

- Apply well-decomposed farmyard manure or compost before the main crop. Rates should follow the TNAU crop-specific recommendation.
- Practise green manuring with sunnhemp, daincha or cowpea, and incorporate it at flowering.
- Return crop residues to the field instead of burning them.
- Use vermicompost or biofertilisers to support soil life.

Conservation tillage and timely operations

Each deep ploughing opens the soil and exposes moisture to sun and wind. Reducing unnecessary tillage protects structure and surface residue (Hatfield et al., 2001).

How to do it:

- Avoid repeated, deep ploughing in the dry season.
- Where possible, adopt minimum or zero tillage, leaving crop residues on the surface.
- Do shallow inter-cultivation (hoeing) to break the surface crust. A loose, dusty top layer reduces capillary rise and slows evaporation.
- Sow immediately after the first effective rains so that crops use stored moisture.

Capture rain where it falls

In semi-arid areas, a large share of heavy-rain water can leave the field as runoff. Slowing it down gives it time to soak in (Rockström et al., 2010).

How to do it:

- Build field bunds along the contour on sloping land, and plant grasses or pulses on them for stability.
- Use ridges and furrows, broad-bed and furrow layouts, or tied ridges to hold water in the field.
- Dig farm ponds or percolation pits at low corners to collect surplus water and recharge groundwater.
- Keep waterways grassed to prevent gully erosion.

Smart cropping choices

How to do it:

- Choose drought-tolerant crops and varieties, such as millets (ragi, sorghum, pearl millet) and pulses, in rainfed areas.
- Prefer short-duration varieties where summer water is limited.
- Practise intercropping, for example pulses within a cereal or oilseed crop, to cover the soil sooner.
- Adjust sowing dates to match the rainfall pattern.
- Maintain adequate plant population. Too many plants compete for scarce water, and too few leave bare soil.

Control weeds early

Weeds consume large amounts of soil water. Early weeding, especially in the first third of the crop's life, is one of the cheapest ways to conserve moisture.

Irrigate efficiently

When irrigation water is available, how it is applied matters as much as how much.

How to do it:

- Use drip or sprinkler systems where possible. Government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY, "per drop more crop") support micro-irrigation.
- Irrigate early in the morning or late in the evening to cut evaporation.
- Irrigate at critical growth stages such as flowering and grain filling, rather than on a fixed calendar.
- Check soil moisture by hand: take soil from the root zone and squeeze it. If it forms a ball that crumbles easily, moisture is adequate. If it will not hold together, irrigation is due.
- Level fields properly so water spreads evenly.

Trees, windbreaks and shade

Rows of trees or shrubs on field boundaries slow hot, dry winds and reduce evaporation from nearby crops. Choose locally suited species and keep them away from the main crop root zone to avoid competition.

A quick seasonal checklist

Stage	Action
Before sowing	Add compost or FYM, green manure, shape bunds and furrows
At sowing	Choose a suitable variety, sow on time, apply mulch
Early growth	Weed early, shallow hoeing

Stage	Action
Growth to flowering	Irrigate at critical stages, using drip where possible
After harvest	Retain residues, avoid burning, repair bunds and ponds

Why These Practices Work Together

No single practice solves heat stress. Mulch cuts evaporation, organic matter raises storage, bunds and ponds increase the amount of rain that enters the soil, and efficient irrigation avoids waste. Together they build a field that stores more, loses less and recovers faster from dry spells. These practices also protect soil microbes and earthworms, which keep the soil healthy over the long term. Farmers can begin small. Mulch one plot, add compost to one field, or dig one percolation pit, and compare crop performance with a neighbouring untreated area. Records of cost and yield will show which practices pay back fastest on a given farm. Local TNAU Krishi Vigyan Kendras and block agriculture offices can help with variety choice, soil testing and demonstrations.

Conclusion

Heat and uneven rainfall are becoming a regular part of farming in Tamil Nadu, but their effect on crops can be softened. By treating soil as a living water bank, farmers can reduce evaporation, capture rain, and make each irrigation count. Mulching, organic matter, reduced tillage, rainwater harvesting, suitable crops and efficient irrigation are simple, affordable and well supported by research. Beginning these steps before summer arrives helps crops "beat the heat" and protects both income and the land for the next generation.

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