

Estate Chronicles: Hunting for rubberwood with dad

By [Ravindran Raman Kutty](#) - February 19, 2023 @ 7:45am



In the past, firewood was used only for cooking and by the brickmakers to bake bricks. When replanting was done in the estates, the rubberwood was literally burnt or buried as it was considered waste material. FILE PIC

Rubber trees not only fed the poor estate worker, but also brought heat to his home and hot food to his table. Firewood was an integral element of an estate dweller, and rubber trees provided such an element.

Sourcing, cutting, drying, chopping and bringing the wood home was another set of skills and experiences that only a few have the privilege to enjoy.

Our house comprised two bedrooms, a kitchen and a dining area that was our study area, too. Our kitchen was fired by rubberwood.

We had no gas or electricity to provide us with heat or fire. We had only dried firewood, and this combined with my sister's cooking, brought the tastiest food to the table at every meal.

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We would stock our firewood in our back garden. My father, brothers and I would traverse the estate in search of a rubber tree that could be cut down and made into fuel for our fire. My sisters were usually exempt from this task.

Once a suitable tree was identified, my father would get my brothers and I to help in sawing down the tree. The chosen tree had to be one that was no more used for tapping. It was an offence to cut down an active tree.

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To saw a huge tree down, it was vital to know the art of sawing and ensure that the tree did not fall on anyone or damage any other tree. We listened earnestly to my father's instructions, and upon his indication, we would start to help him saw down the tree.

With our ever-reliable Sandvik saw, we would start sawing, and would continue our push-me-pull-you action in our respective directions till the correct point of being able to shout "Timber!"

At times, we would have to make a wedge in the tree trunk to ensure easy falling. The greatest challenge was when the tree was on a slope.

Sawing a tree on flat ground was much easier compared to sawing down a tree at the correct angle on a slope. However, I am proud to say that we succeeded in the task.

Normally, dry dead tree branches would break into pieces once the tree had fallen. I would grab the chopper and cut the branches quickly thus paving the way for my father and brothers to saw the tree trunk.

The bigger the tree trunk the more wood we would have, although that also meant more sawing, more energy and more diligence in completing this feat.

We would cut the tree trunk to about 1.2m in length and load them onto my father's trusted Raleigh. We used to load the firewood onto the carrier and insert the logs through the triangular bar, then push the bicycle on the laterite roads. At times, if we were lucky, we would get help from Mr Krishnan or Mr Parameswaran, the tractor drivers, to deliver the firewood to our home.

Our task was not done yet. Once the firewood reached our home, we would move the wood to the back garden and saw the trunks and branches again to about 400m in length. Then the sawn wood would be chopped into little pieces with two purposes in mind – one was to let the wet wood get dry and the other was to be able to stack the wood neatly.

On rainy days, we would sometimes face a glitch when my mother and elder sister had difficulty in lighting the stove with damp firewood. They would at times use rubber scraps that acted as a catalyst for the rubberwood to ignite or sometimes use a hollow metal pipe measuring about 30cm long to blow right into the fire.

Once the fire was lit, our home would not only be filled with warmth from the heat, but also with the wonderful aroma of my sister's cooking. Many people have pointed out that using firewood to cook adds greater taste to the food. In my opinion, be it gas or firewood, my sister's cooking was magical and simply delicious.

Searching for and collecting firewood, albeit a daunting chore, was also a time that strengthened the bond between my father and his sons.

We may have had to share the hard work, but we also shared the chatter and laughter while looking for the right tree, we shared the skill and energy in cutting down the tree and preparing the firewood, and we shared the feeling of relief and success in completing the task together.

During that time, firewood was used only for cooking and by the brickmakers to bake bricks. When replanting was done in the estates, the rubberwood was literally burnt or buried as it was considered waste material.

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Only in early 2000 did rubberwood become the most extensively used timber in Southeast Asia. It replaced hardwood in the production of furniture flooring and joiner and became the raw material of choice for the production of medium density fibreboards and particleboards.

Rubberwood has become a cherished item today. I shall never forget my intimate moments sawing, chopping, carrying and finally bringing it into my mum's kitchen to cook our simple dishes and to keep a family of 10 living and growing.

The next instalment of the Estate Chronicles will be published in a fortnight

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