

Harela Festival Celebrated Across U'khand with Plantation Drives

The Harela festival, unique to Uttarakhand, was celebrated across the state on Saturday with a number of tree plantation drives and functions held to mark the festival which stresses the importance of the environment and the need for conservation of the green cover.

The forest department which had during the celebrations last year, contributed over five lakh trees which were planted by various state government departments in their premises and public places over a period of one month, said that this year, they were hoping that the plantation mark would surpass last year's record as school premises had also been added in the plantation drive.

Rajender Mahajan, principal chief conservator of forests told *TOI* that for plain areas, saplings of lemon, orange, amla, and blue berries were being provided while for higher reaches, plants of timla, kaafal etc would be given. He added that the forest department had also kept aside a fund of Rs 6.50 crore from which those citizens who have planted and maintained a tree for three years will be given an incentive of Rs 300.

Forest minister Dinesh Agarwal linked the festival to the cultural tradition of the state. He said that it was "heartening that people had embraced the tree plantation drive which had been initiated by the state government." Political parties like the Congress and BJP, too, exhorted their members to "plant as many saplings as possible." State Congress Chief Kishore Upadhyay said that the party has set a target of planting two lakh saplings this time. BJP state president Ajay Bhatt termed the festival as "an important one in these times of global warming when the ecological balance had been disturbed." "There is an urgent need to plant more trees now," he said.

In Kumaon where the festival is celebrated with much enthusiasm, there were reports of tree plantation drives in the three main districts of Almora, Nainital and Udham Singh Nagar. In Udham Singh Nagar, more than fifty thousand saplings were planted across the district on Saturday.

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