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Mumbai: FDA effort bears fruit, safer mangoes on shelf this season

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MUMBAI: The state Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has assured that the mangoes you relish this summer will be relatively chemical-free. A slew of measures, including expansion of ripening chambers, availability of a safer ripening agent, awareness drives and, more importantly, the sweltering summer have come to the help of mango lovers. In a first, the food regulator conducted workshops with 45 APMC markets across the state over the last 45 days to apprise them, and through them mango traders, of a healthy and scientific alternative-ethylene gas-to ripen the fruit. "We understood that merely prosecuting traders and destroying mango stocks was not going to bring about a complete change. Instead, we thought we would educate them about the harms of using carbide while informing about the pluses of ethylene," said FDA commissioner Pallavi Darade.



RIPENING AGENT

DANGER OF CARBIDE

- > Artificial ripening by carbide gas, is prohibited. Industrial grade carbide, also called 'masala', contains traces of arsenic and phosphorus which are harmful
- > It can cause dizziness, irritation, weakness, vomiting, ulcer etc

GOOD ALTERNATIVE | ETHYLENE GAS

- > FSSAI permitted use of ethylene gas to ripen fruits in 2016
- > Ethylene is a hormone naturally produced within fruits
- > Treatment of unripe fruits with ethylene gas triggers natural ripening
- > Ethylene gas is available in gas and sachet forms

Last year, four traders were booked for use of carbide, but this year, officials said they have not yet come across any case.

In 2016, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India permitted use of ethylene, a hormone naturally produced in fruits, to be used for artificial ripening. However, while its gaseous forms had already come into the market, it's only this year that sachets have become widely available. Traders agree that easy availability of the ripening agent combined with expansion of ethylene ripening chambers in the state has been a game changer. "Across the state, there are more than 100 ripening chambers that increasing number of traders have started using," said Shailesh Adhao, joint commissioner, FDA.

Sanjay Pansare, a fruit trader and former director of Mumbai APMC, said that the use of calcium carbide is "100% gone". "About 80% traders are using ripening chambers. For the rest, the summer heat itself has been adequate," he said, adding that mangoes come to the city from Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, Gujarat to Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. "The ethylene sachets, available for just Rs 3-Rs 5 with effect lasting up to 36 hours, have helped small traders. They can be placed near boxes to trigger ripening," he said. However, for now, only Chinese firms are making it, he said.

Ram Morade, a trader at Crawford Market, said ripening chambers could prove to be expensive for small-time traders. The ripening chambers attract a cost of Rs 100 for each box, said Pansare. The mango trade is worth more than Rs 500 crore in the city alone.