



Suma Krishnaswamy, an M. Sc. in Botany and a Gold Medalist in Plant tissue culture from Bangalore University, is the founder president of a fully integrated biotechnology major Cambium Biotechnologies. Cambium is in-fact a diversified plant tissue culture technology house which has been engaged in R&D projects on the same.

It provides technical guidance on issues including cultivation, marketing, landscape design, and water conservation to individual farmers and corporate clients. It has been in the forefront of micro propagation technologies since its inception. As of date it has a database of over 700 standardised tissue culture protocols for a wide range of plant species from ornamentals to rare medicinal plants.

Suma, the driving force behind Cambium, is truly a woman of substance. Her personal philosophy being to make the world a better place socially, environmentally and aesthetically through positive contribution and reserving part of the employment opportunity in her company for un-skilled and under educated women from weaker societies, thereby empowering them to achieve economic self-sufficiency. She has been the recipient of numerous awards and citations such as the “Women In Vocation Award, 2002”, Award for Entrepreneurial initiatives in Biotechnology – Asia Pacific Convention of Entrepreneurial Women, April 2002.

She was selected for tableau display on March 8th, International Women’s Day by the Department of Horticulture, Government of Karnataka. She was also chosen as a Mentee by Trestle Group Foundation, Zurich whose mission is to empower entrepreneurs in developing countries by directly connecting them with established business professionals.

Moreover, she is the only Indian participant to be selected for US State Department/Fortune Global mentorship program for women entrepreneurs, April-May 2008, Mentoring company DuPont, Wilmington, Delaware, USA. She was mentored for one month by Diane Gulyas,

Group Vice President of DuPont Performance Materials. She has also served as a guest instructor at the Nodal Training Institute for Entrepreneurship Development in Agri-Clinics and Agri-Business Centers, educating rural women in business skills.

Furthermore she was chosen in Jan 2009 to participate in the Goldman Sachs’ global initiative ‘10,000 women’, which aims at empowering high potential women entrepreneurs with formal, intensive management training. The training programme was imparted by Indian School of Business, Hyderabad. To top it, she is the recipient of the “Best Business Plan Award, 2009” instituted by the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad. In a free wheeling interview with Small Enterprise India, Suma talks at length about her cherished project Cambium, her future goals and aspirations.

Tell us about your company Cambium Biotechnologies?

Cambium Biotechnologies is a Bangalore-based plant tissue culture based Biotechnology Company whose strengths lies in Research & Development enabled contract research. Our primary focus has been contractual development of a wide range of plant varieties: medicinal, horticulture and ornamental plants. Special emphasis is laid on projects dealing with rare and endangered plants which face extinction and need protection and preservation.

Our In-house pipeline includes R&D based protocols / technology readily available for mass rapid multiplication of 700 diverse plant species. Set-up in the year 1995, Cambium Biotechnologies specializes in mass propagation of elite plants/products under strictly adhered-to Non Disclosure Secrecy agreements for exclusive clients. This is accomplished through tailor-made individual, plant-specific unique bespoke models yielding high value biochemicals catering to the natural healthcare segment.

The business has its own laboratory in a 22,000 sq.ft. plot at KIADB Industrial area close to the Biotech park in Jigani, Bangalore South.

In all, there are 15 permanent employees. Additional personnel are hired on contract during peak planting season or for time bound projects. The business is managed by two qualified technocrats with about 15 years of experience in Biotechnology and management practices.

What inspired you to start your own company?

Primarily, it was a need to make a positive contribution to improving the lives in the immediate environment we live in: be an employment creator rather than an employment seeker. Further, there was need for somebody to step in and work on medicinal plants which by virtue of their medicinal value face rampant collection and subsequent extinction.

Most industry players are concentrating on plants like banana, ornamentals and field crops; very few units are seen handling medicinal plant research. There is clearly a serious dearth of cultivated, superior quality herbal raw material for the pharmaceutical industry dealing in natural products. Although wild collection is prohibited, illegal exploitation of natural resources is rampant. By providing a viable, legal alternative, customers can be easily influenced to utilize our services and products.

What were the hurdles you faced as a women entrepreneur? How did you tackle them?

Problems and hurdles are present in everyone’s lives. Whether you look at them as a hurdle or opportunity is your choice. What sets a true entrepreneur apart is making that choice and crossing the thin line which separates the two. I saw my problems as an opportunity to learn by solving or working around them. One positive aspect of my profession is that as an entrepreneur and a unique service provider, I am able to gain access to a wide spectrum of people who might not have given me the time of their day otherwise.

How has your journey been so far? How far has your objectives been achieved?

It has been a very interesting journey, which threw up myriad of challenges. Solving the problems faced by customers in their varied plant requirements provided a unique learning opportunity. Meeting different people from diverse vocations and interests has given a unique flavour to my learning curve. My stints in the US for the Global women entrepreneurs’ mentorship program and at ISB during the Goldman Sachs 10000 women initiative have been a hugely enriching experience. The underlying message has been to “Pay forward”: to pass on the learning and experience to deserving and underserved people who might not have had the opportunities that came my way and would benefit from my experience.

What are your goals for the future?

Our goal is to bring at least about 50 endangered medicinal plants available globally, under our umbrella of preservation, cultivation and supply of herbal raw material by the year 2015. We envisage a growth model which can provide natural & affordable, herbal healthcare to the common man by facilitating competitively priced, superior herbal raw material to Pharmaceutical drug manufacturers. This can dissuade and preclude collection from the much reduced forest wealth.

Where do you foresee Cambium in ten years time?

We are sincerely committed to our valuable clients to offer strict confidentiality, open communication and are bound by a long-term obligation to achieving agricultural sustainability by adopting modern biotechnology methods. Our endeavor is to be a resource point with cost effective micro propagation solutions for a wide repertoire of medicinal plants using advanced biotechnology methods

Cambium Biotechnologies wants to specialise in high value - low volume natural plant products to cater to the healthcare segment.

What is the employment potential for prospective entrepreneurs in this field?

Biotechnology is such a vast field with far reaching applications and consequences. It just needs perseverance and dedication to keep at it till the results are realised.

With your vast and varied experience as an Entrepreneur what would your advice be to upcoming entrepreneurs particularly women?

“Climb every mountain, cross every stream; chase every rainbow till you find your dream” (is my advise to all women). My mentor and Senior VP, Performance Materials, Dupont Ms. Diane Gulyas urged me to ‘dream bigger’: When you have the potential to achieve something, achieve that and then try surpassing that. I would like to pass on the same message.