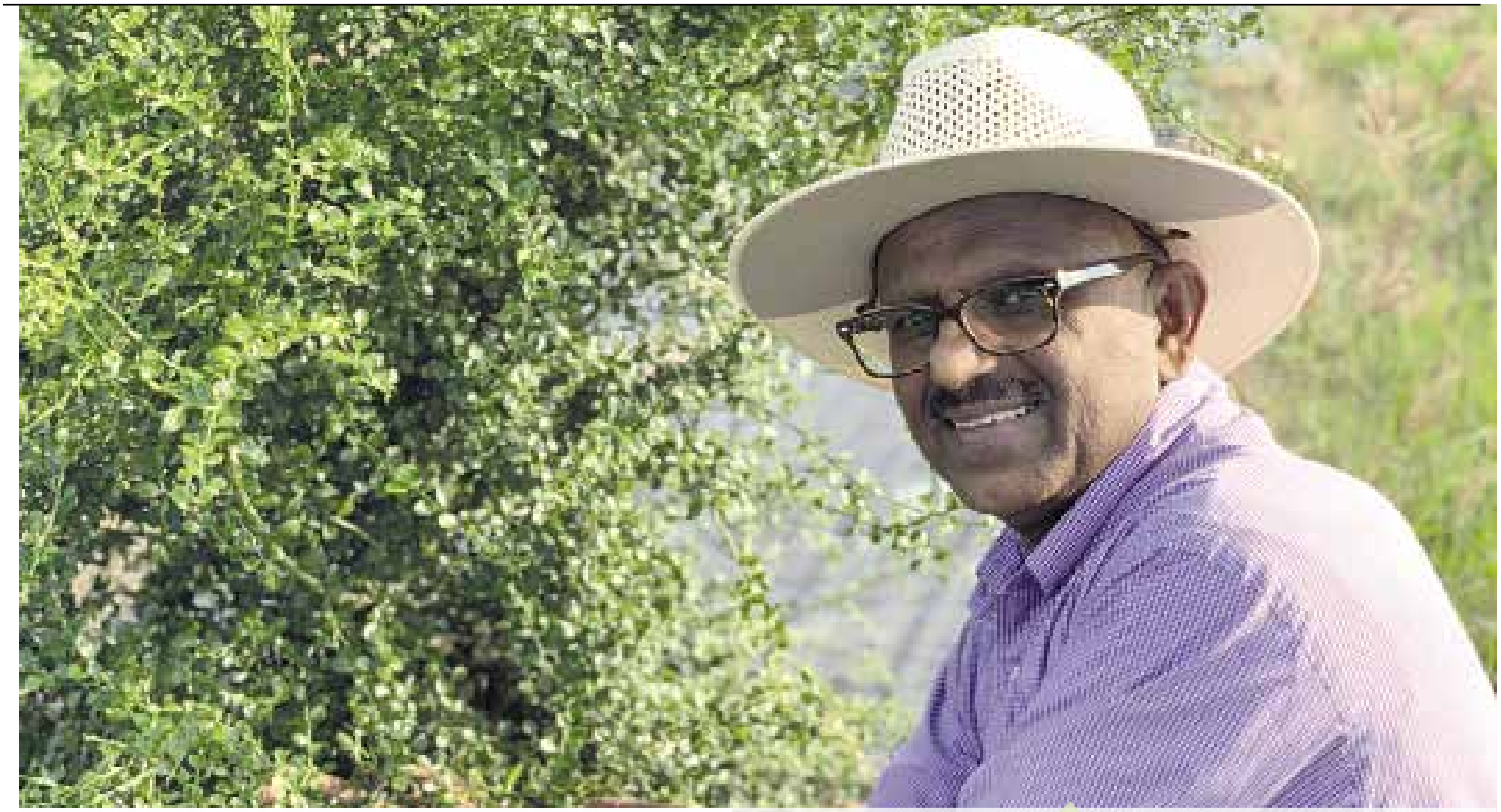
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DEEP ROOTS, LASTING IMPACT



For Dr. Mani Skaria, PhD—Founder, President and CEO of US Citrus LLC, and Professor Emeritus at Texas A&M University–Kingsville—life has been a sustained lesson in foundations: scientific, ethical, emotional, and ecological. Across continents and professional roles, through both achievement and repeated loss over more than four decades, one conviction has remained constant—enduring strength is built not through rapid expansion, but through roots that grow deep.

Born into a rural Indian household, Mani's earliest lessons were not delivered through formal instruction but through lived experience. Both his parents were government servants in extension education—his father in agriculture, his mother in public health. Their work connected knowledge to people, theory to practice. That ethic shaped his worldview early, even if he did not recognise it at the time.

One childhood incident would later prove formative. At thirteen, Mani asked his father for a new bicycle. The family could afford it. Instead of agreeing, his father pointed to the harvested paddy field in front of their home and said, "Grow vegetables. Earn it yourself." To the teenage Mani, it felt like an insult. Why should he labour when money was available?

Yet he did it. With help from a caretaker, Mani cultivated vegetables, sold them, and earned enough to buy not one, but three bicycles. He bought none. What stayed with him was not the money, but the experience—watching something grow from the soil, understanding effort, patience, and value creation. Decades later, as a scientist and entrepreneur in the United States, he would realise that this moment had quietly laid the foundation for everything that followed.

Learning to step back

Mani's academic journey eventually took him to Purdue University, where he completed a PhD in Plant Pathology (Virology). Soon after, he was assigned to a USAID project in Jordan, through Washington State University supporting agricultural development under a US government programme. Though trained as a pathologist, he was placed in citrus research—an unfamiliar domain. The experience, he says, changed the way he learned forever.

Working in a foreign country, with limited support and immense responsibility, forced him to break complex problems into manageable layers. "Like peeling an onion," he explains. Instead of being overwhelmed by complexity, he learned to step back, observe systems, and approach challenges incrementally.

This habit of distance—of seeing the whole before focusing on parts—became central to his thinking. A citrus tree, he notes, looks healthy when examined too closely. It is only when one steps back that patterns of decline become visible. The lesson applied not just to trees, but to institutions, industries, and even people.

Building systems, not just careers

When Mani joined Texas A&M University in 1988, South Texas appeared to host a thriving citrus economy. Large, family-run enterprises managed extensive orchards spanning over 730 acres, operated USDA-certified citrus nurseries comparable to five-star classifications, and controlled the full value chain—from packing houses to marketing and value-added products. On the surface, the industry looked robust and self-sufficient. Yet, through a trained scientific lens, Mani identified a serious underlying flaw: nursery stock circulating across the region was biologically compromised, harbouring infections invisible to the untrained eye and quietly undermining the long-term health of the citrus ecosystem.

His global exposure—spanning Israel, California, Florida, South Africa, and Jordan—gave him comparative insight. Texas, he realised, lacked a clean citrus programme. Speaking this truth was not easy. Growers resisted. Questioning established practices rarely earns popularity.

But Mani persisted. Over seven years, he helped build a clean citrus system from nothing. By 1997, the programme was mandated into Texas law, signed by then-Governor George Bush. The achievement marked a turning point. Mani was less interested in publishing hundreds of papers than in creating an institutional framework that would outlive him.

"I wanted impact," he says simply. Discovering plant diseases, identifying systemic flaws, and building preventive infrastructure mattered more to him than academic metrics alone.

Independence, ethics, and truth-telling

Alongside academia, Mani pursued entrepreneurial ventures that gave him financial independence. A health issue linked to indoor environments led him and his wife to establish a diagnostic laboratory after specialised training, including a short course at Harvard. The business succeeded beyond expectations.

This independence, Mani believes, gave him something invaluable: freedom to speak honestly. Academic systems, he observes, are often constrained by funding dependencies and institutional politics. When one's livelihood is not tied solely to a salary, it becomes easier to question flawed assumptions and speak inconvenient truths.

For Mani, ethics is not an abstract concept. It is embedded in everyday decisions—whether one is selling plants, fruit, or services. Customers, he notes, recognise integrity instinctively. Without it, no enterprise can survive long-term.

He describes business not as profit-seeking alone, but as a carefully balanced system. Costs of production, logistics, intermediaries, retail margins, and a modest surplus are all necessary. Profit, in this sense, is not greed—it is resilience. What matters most, however, is character. Banks may assess cash flow, collateral, and credit, but ultimately, they evaluate commitment and integrity. Without those, numbers mean little.

Losing everything—and rebuilding again

Despite decades of professional success, Mani's life and work have been repeatedly tested by forces beyond human control. In 2012, a severe hailstorm with winds reaching 80 mph caused extensive damage to his home. In 2020, Hurricane Hanna passed directly over the US Citrus nursery, destroying 120,000 USDA-certified citrus plants and resulting in losses exceeding twelve million dollars in a single day. The following year, an unprecedented freeze



wiped out more than a hundred acres of lime orchards, including fruit that had already been contracted to restaurants, underscoring the fragility of even the most carefully built systems.

Each loss was total. Each recovery demanded reinvention.

Mani does not recount these events with resentment. Instead, he frames them as lessons in impermanence. "It takes a lifetime to build," he reflects, "and a fraction of a second to lose." Gratitude, rather than despair, guides his response. Each setback forced innovation, leading to new systems and insights that strengthened his work.

Vetiver: science meets metaphor

It was during this period of rebuilding that Mani encountered vetiver in a meaningful way. Introduced through academic collaborators at Alabama A&M University, he was struck by an image of vetiver roots growing twelve feet deep in just eight months. Intrigued, he began experimenting.

What followed surprised even a seasoned scientist. Planted alongside young citrus saplings, vetiver acted as a living protector—moderating wind, retaining deep soil moisture during drought, suppressing weeds without herbicides, stabilising soil organically. In extreme heat without irrigation, trees survived.

For Mani, vetiver became more than a functional companion plant. It became a metaphor. Strong roots first. Growth later.

He was not initially interested in vetiver's commercial by-products—oils, fibres, handicrafts. What captivated him was its ecological intelligence. Nature, he realised again, already holds many answers if humans are willing to observe rather than dominate.

Giving back to the land

The metaphor deepened after a devastating landslide in Kerala claimed hundreds of lives. Disturbed by the tragedy, Mani committed to donating a million vetiver plants to the Western Ghats. His approach was deliberately decentralised working through schools and villages, encouraging children to plant, observe, and share saplings with neighbours.

The goal was not just erosion control. It was reconnection—between people and land, knowledge and responsibility. Watching a plant grow, Mani believes, builds stewardship far more effectively than lectures ever could.

Knowledge as inheritance

Why, after such a full life, did Mani begin documenting his reflections through Dr. Mani's Insights? https://drmanisinsights.com/ The answer lies in repetition. Again, people asked how he navigated science, business, loss, and recovery. He realised that experience, if not shared, is wasted.

He recalls an international citrus conference where scientists discussed helping growers without understanding what it takes to run a viable business. The gap troubled him. Science without context, he argues, cannot serve society.

His platform is an attempt to bridge that divide—to translate lived experience into accessible learning. He writes and speaks not as a guru, but as someone shaped by both blessings and blows.

A quiet call for depth

In a world obsessed with speed, scale, and disruption, Mani's message is quietly radical. Go deep. Build foundations. Honour ethics. Learn from nature. Integrate science with traditional knowledge. Measure success not by accumulation, but by what endures after loss.

Like vetiver, his life reminds us that resilience grows underground long before it becomes visible above the soil.

Marie Banu Rodriguez