

## IMPORTANCE OF REPLANTING

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Last month I returned from an extensive tour of the Assam Tea Districts and one particular feature of their excellent agricultural practices impressed me so strongly that I felt compelled to ask for this intrusion on the platform in order to give this subject the publicity I consider it deserves.

On the first morning of my tour I was waiting in the garden for my host, and facing me was one of the finest sheets of tea I had ever seen. You can imagine my horror when a gang of labourers appeared and started uprooting bushes that any Ceylon Proprietor or Planter would have given his soul to possess.

My host joined me and I immediately asked him the meaning of this extraordinary procedure. His reply was, "that field only gives 1,300 lbs. an acre — nothing under 1,600 lbs. is any use to us, so we are replanting it."

Lack of time compels me to cut a long story short. The essence of what I have to say boils down to the fact that Assam is fully convinced that the ECONOMIC LIFE of their tea is between 50 and 60 years, after which, yield progressively decreases. I visited Tocklai Research Station and was assured that yield records kept over many years demonstrated their contention. At first I wondered whether this had anything to do with their pruning system of just a cut-across every year. But every means of rejuvenation by the knife has been tried without success; while increased applications of fertiliser have no effect in checking the slow deterioration in vitality. In other words, tea like every other form of life reaches a peak of maturity, (in this case about 60 years) after which vigour starts deteriorating. If this is true of Assam I see no reason why our tea in Ceylon should be more fortunate in its span of life.

In Assam they have adopted a regular replanting policy based on 2% of their acreage every year, and many of the estates started this over twenty years ago. It must be admitted that for them it is a very much easier undertaking. The land is dead flat and the soil is entirely free of rock. Indeed it is said that there is not a stone in the whole of Assam. Labour costs are lower, and replanting provides useful work during the winter months. After uprooting, mechanical preparation of the clearing can be carried out. Finally, very high yielding strains of seed have been developed and crop can be harvested within the third year from planting.

Nevertheless, in spite of the problematical and difficult conditions here, if the contention of old age deterioration is accepted, it would appear absolutely essential for Ceylon estates to begin a policy of replanting, if we are to avoid eventually finding ourselves trying to survive on a slowly shrinking economy.

Apart from the question of age, much of our older tea is too widely spaced and there is no doubt that it is lack of proper cover which is our principal handicap. In Assam they do not think in terms of the individual bush — it is the plucking table that concerns them, and that table must be 100% cover.

If by correct methods of replanting we can achieve a complete cover, our main nightmares, from the agricultural aspect, are automatically solved. Weed growth is smothered, erosion checked and tilth of the soil maintained by a jungle of tea. From the commercial aspect we all know too well that cost of production can be substantially lowered only by increase in yield. On our present comparatively low yields a drop of 50 lbs. an acre can often sway the balance between profit or loss.

However, the main point I wish to spotlight is this vital problem of the age of tea, which I am sure you will agree, merits very serious consideration from all those responsible for the future. We have perhaps been waiting too long for the perfect blight-resistant, high-yielding, high-quality clone to be developed. I feel sure that on a long term policy — and no agricultural pursuit can be anything but a long term policy — we should start energetically tackling the problem now, and not continue postponing this task until it is too late.

The first question which needs answering is, of course, "Can it be done successfully?", for we all know there have been failures in the past. No doubt the answer will contain many provisions, but I feel sure the Director of the T.R.I. could give us some valuable information on the recent experiments in replanting on St. Coombs, which would give us a lead when undertaking our first attempts in replacing our old tea with vigorous young stock.