

INTRODUCING THE PLANTING DIVISION

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Planting Officer.

THE Planting Division, a new-comer to the Coconut Research Scheme, came into being in October, 1948, when a clerk was appointed. The following January, the writer took up duties as Replanting Officer, and started work by corresponding with hundreds of estates to enquire whether they would be willing to supply selected seednuts. It was not until March the following year, when three field assistants and six nursery attendants were appointed and the three Coconut Research Scheme Advisory Officers were added to the staff of the Planting Division, that active operations were commenced; since then, the Planting Division has still further expanded its staff, which now consists of the Planting Officer, the Assistant Planting Officer, three Field Advisory Officers, eight Field Assistants, nine Nursery Attendants, one clerk, one typist and an office peon.

The Division has now got its own motor vehicles—a 2½-ton "Commer" lorry and a "Land Rover" or Jeep; it also possesses a fleet of hand-carts, water carts, and wheelbarrows, and carries a large stock of barbed wire, iron fence posts and field tools. The construction of a store and garage to house this equipment is now nearing completion.

The field staff is distributed over all the main coconut-growing areas of the Island and the operations include the provision of an advisory service to coconut growers, the selection of sites for coconut nurseries, the purchase of seednuts and the disposal of selected seedlings.

The three Advisory Officers are mainly concerned with giving advice on agricultural methods to coconut growers, more particularly to members of Coconut Producers' Co-operative Societies; in addition to these duties, they are responsible for the proper establishment of coconut nurseries for these societies, and the selection and distribution of seedlings.

It is also their responsibility that the seedlings are correctly planted, and the young plants receive proper attention.

These officers are stationed at Chilaw, Negombo, and Kurunegala. Although their work is mainly concerned with the small grower, whenever a problem is received from an estate, an Advisory Officer is usually sent to make a preliminary survey, and the reports are sent to Headquarters and considered by the Planting and the Research Officers concerned. If necessary the Research Officer will pay a visit to the estate himself, and finally a considered opinion will be forwarded to the Estate Superintendent.

From the start the work of establishing nurseries has been held back by difficulties of obtaining land. Various Government Departments were approached and eventually the Department of Agriculture, the Coconut Research Scheme, and some estate owners provided the land for the establishment of the following nurseries:—Ratmalagala (Madampe), Carmel Group (Kurunegala), St. Anne's (Puttalam), Labuduwa Government Farm (Galle), Walpita Government Farm (Mirigama), and Hettipola (N.W.P.).

In addition to its own nurseries, the Planting Division has provided seednuts and established nurseries for the following Coconut Producers' Co-operative Societies:—Bolgoda, Dunagaha, Veyangoda, Madampella, Sandalankawa, Mutugala, Kurunegala and Gokarella, and planting material for nurseries on Agricultural Stations, Colonization Settlements and Company Estates.

For replanting or new planting of coconuts, it is essential that only the best planting material available, *i.e.*, selected seednuts, should be used. First-quality seednuts come from "mother palms" which have a consistent yield record of 80 nuts or more per palm per annum. Such palms are few and far between and would not supply more than a small fraction of the quantity required.

For this reason the practice of using "block-nuts" has been followed; these are the very best nuts which can be selected from the heaps of nuts derived from fields or blocks on estates with sustained records of a high annual yield of nuts per palm and a good copra out-turn over a period of five years or more. Not many estates come up to this high standard, and of the large number inspected, we have been able to find only 16 which are up to the required standard and are at the same time willing to let us have seednuts at reasonable prices.

Some high-yielding estates have unfortunately been unable to assist us owing to the present high price of "white copra" which is now fetching as much as Rs. 350/- per candy in the local market. In consequence they will only sell seednuts at a very high price if they possess a quota for the production of "white copra." The Planting Division's financial position does not permit payment of high prices to such growers and so we have to be dependent for our seednuts on estates which produce ordinary copra or sell nuts to the mills.

The selection of seednuts on these estates is done under the supervision of a field assistant and his nursery attendant. The selection is very strict and only ripe undamaged nuts, of satisfactory size and weight, are chosen. Similarly when the resulting seedlings are examined several months later, all weak, leggy and undersized plants are rejected. It will be obvious that such precautions will ensure that the future generation of coconuts will give high yields, providing the young palms receive proper attention while they are growing up and the mature palms are regularly cultivated and manured.

Up to the time of writing, the distribution of selected seednuts has been as follows:—

Replanting Division Nurseries	183,875
Coconut Co-operative Society Nurseries	98,000
Government Agricultural Stations, etc.	186,000
Estates and Others	12,450
Total	480,325

Bookings to date for seednut deliveries during 1950 already amount to approximately 100,000 nuts and there are other orders, for delivery even as far forward as 1951.

The target is the supply of two million seednuts annually which will produce roughly one million selected seedlings, which will be sufficient to plant up about 15 thousand acres every year. If this is maintained it will be sufficient for the requirements of the industry, and will ensure that its productivity does not fall off.

In addition, a large number of progressive estate owners are, on their own initiative, replanting their properties, and this is happening on an extensive scale. This awakening interest is I consider due, in large measure, to the attention that has been drawn to the need for rejuvenation of this key industry, by press publicity, by the work of field officers, and by lectures and talks at various Planters' Associations and meetings of co-operative societies, and by participating in agricultural exhibitions.

It cannot be doubted that the coconut planting programme is one of the most important undertakings which are now being carried out in this Island and it is up to all concerned to help the campaign and so assure its success. The officials of the Department of Co-operative Societies have done much towards the promotion of this important work through the agency of the various Coconut Co-operative Societies, which are now firmly established in most of the principal coconut-growing areas.

The Planting Division is financed by a special vote from the Department of Agriculture and funds for the establishment of nurseries for Co-operative Societies have hitherto been provided by a special vote from the Department of Commodity Purchase. Unfortunately this vote is now exhausted and work on behalf of the Coconut Co-operative Societies is, for the present, at a standstill. Furthermore, the vote from the Department of Agriculture has also been subjected to a very severe cut, necessitating a drastic curtailment of our activities and a reduction of nearly 50% in the number of seednuts collected for distribution.

Although a satisfactory start has been made, the present position is far from satisfactory. The machinery has been set in motion, the wheels have begun to revolve and all the little cogs are doing their share but the oil and the lubricants are lacking. If these are provided, there is every chance that the Replanting Project will maintain a state of perpetual motion, continuously replacing new palms for old, so that the Coconut Industry of Ceylon will not degenerate in its old age, but will remain a vital and fundamental factor in the economy of this country.