

THE COCONUT PALM, THE KALPAVRIKSHA OF INDIA

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It is a well known fact that the coconut is one of the most important oil-seed plants of the tropics.

Though this plant has been recognized since pre-historic times opinion as to its origin seems to vary.

According to De Candolle, the original home of the coconut was the Western Hemisphere. But it is now generally recognized that the region from Madagascar to the Philippines should be regarded as the home of the palm.

There seems to be a close relationship between its existence and the human inhabitants of the numerous islands in the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. Wherever mankind exists in these regions, the coconut is indispensable. It provides a variety of foods and as well as an ingredient of foods and different articles for the natives of the islands.

It is now generally believed that the coconut has continuously spread eastward by natural and human agencies, till at the present time, almost the whole of the tropical countries, like the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Ceylon, Malaya and Thailand are adorned to a greater or lesser degree by this wealthy and graceful palm.

It is believed that in the old days a leper king of Ceylon discovered that the Coconut oil from the palm growing wild along the coast of his country gave him a great relief. This was made known to his people and they were encouraged to cultivate more palm in those very early days.

Since the time of discovery, coconut plantations have spread widely, the largest area under cultivation is India, followed by the Philippines, Ceylon, Indonesia, South Sea Islands, Malaya and Thailand.

Small scale coconut plantations are also found in the Cape Verd Islands, Guam, French Guiana, Venezuela, Paraguay, Colombia, Brazil and Belgian Congo.

Recently considerable research on various aspects of the coconut palm has been carried on by a number of men, so that knowledge of the palm and its uses has developed rapidly over a wide area.

Every part of the coconut tree can be utilized in some way or other. The young fruit is palatable, the water from the tender nut is a refreshing drink during the hot day.

The fresh milk is utilized in preparing the daily food of our households. The oil from the copra is utilized in the manufacture of margarins, soap and toilet articles. The copra cake, containing high quality protein is used in chicken and animal feed. Desiccated coconut, mostly exported from the Philippines, is used in the manufacture of confectionary. The fibre from the husk is made into rope, mats and wall-board. The shell is burnt in order to get charcoal, which is sometimes used in the manufacture of gas masks. Buttons, spoons and ladles also can be made of the shell. The Saw-oo (ซาวอู) is also made of coconut shell, so the coconut shell is one of the best materials for our craftman to exhibit his skilful carving. The trunk of the palm is utilized in the manufacture of high class furniture. The fronds of the palm are used in thatching the roof of the hut, and in basket making. The apple or the cotyledon of the nut is edible. The sweet juice from the spathe can be converted into sugar, a mild Liqueur, and vinegar. The tender bud of the crown is used for salad. The tender husk of some varieties is used for pickles. The fibrous sheath of the leaf is used for cap and slipper. The oil from the shell is recognized to have medicinal properties.

In sanskrit the coconut is called the Kalpavriksha (कल्पवृक्ष) the tree which provides all the necessities of life.

There are over 30 varieties of coconut in Thailand based mainly on the size, shape and colour of the nut. The colour of the nut varies from dark green to deep orange or brick red.

Three types can be distinguished :—

1. The palms having a tall crown yield annually 60-80 large nuts.

2. The palms having medium crown yield annually 80-100 smaller nuts.
3. The palms of the dwarf type yield annually over 120 small nuts which are usually called baby coconut.

The age of fruiting varies :-

1. The tall crown at the age of 7-8 years.
2. The medium crown at the age of 5-6 years.
3. The dwarf type at the age of 3-4 years.

The number of trees per rai depends on the type of the tree, i.e. 16 for the large, 25 for the medium and 46 for the dwarf type. The following table shows the numbers of acres of coconut plantation in the principal coconut producing countries of the world :-

India	1,387,773	acres
Philippines	1,361,126	"
Indonesia	950,000	"
Ceylon	1,100,000	"
Malaya	600,000	"
South Sea Islands	600,000	"
Thailand	134,000	"

The improvement of the yield lies in the method of seed selection. Seed for new plantations should come from only the most productive trees. In coconut cultivation the failure to use good seed at the start has more serious consequences than in the growing of other plants. In the growing of crops like corn and rice, the plantings are renewed annually.

If a mistake is made in one year it may be corrected in another. Moreover, in these crops, the value of individual plants is very small. So when barren corn plants or rogues in the rice fields or other undesirable individuals appear in the nursery fields, the farmer may get rid of them without feeling that he loses anything substantially. In fact, he knows that in the long run he will gain by so doing.

With the coconut, however, once a planter sets the seedling in the field, it is for its entire life, which means for 30 to 100 years.

In the case of planting an inferior variety of cocount, the owner has to take care of it and spend money on it just the same as though it were a superior yielder. It takes 4 to 10 years before a tree is discovered to be unproductive. By this time the owuer has already spent quite a large sum on it.

As the poor yielding tree is seldom cut-down it becomes a liability in the plantation.

It is certainly better for planters to leave the poor yields alone rather than to cut them down because the vacated spaces which were previously occupied by plants require constant attention to keep them tidy. Probably, the most common method of selection consists principally of choosing the seed-nuts from a pile of nuts. The ones that are considered to be suitable usually are the largest and best looking-

Under the subject of coconut seed selection, Barrett (1920) advises us to choose fully matured nuts and to reject those coming from irregular-bearing trees, and those coming from a tree over 25 years old. He considers that one or two nuts at the tip of each bunch are unsuitable for planting purpose. Roundish nuts are preferred to ablong ones by this author.

The Philippines Farmer recommends the selection of seed trees which have come into full bearing, and of nuts that are medium sized, roundish in shape and possessing a thick layer of meat.

It is thought by these authors that coconut plantations near the coast should be planted with seeds taken as far inland as possible and vice versa, but they give no reason for this.