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# Coconuts - Go For It

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Recently, the option of planting coconuts as a plantation crop has resurfaced.

The theme of the 2018 ISP National Seminar held in July in Kuala Lumpur was *Malaysian Plantation Industry: Crop Options*. One of the papers presented was entitled, "Revitalise Coconut as a Plantation Crop". Later, in August in Ipoh, twenty papers on various topics of coconuts were discussed at the National Coconut Conference. This was followed by an active discussion among members of the Malaysian Estate Owners Association (MEOA), where one member commented that Sri Lankans consume a lot of coconuts in their daily diet, and have one of the lowest heart disease rates per capital. Another member remarked that it will be useful if someone can compile the statistics of global coconut trade [likely available from the Jakarta-based Asian and Pacific Coconut Community (APCC)].

In the old days, coconut oil was an important edible fat, as well as a raw material for soap and industrial chemicals. Compared to coconut, oil palm produces more oil, but the longer life span of the coconut palm, the greater ease of handling the crop, and the domestic use of its products, including toddy and arrack, offset its lower oil productivity. Hence, the coconut story is becoming interesting again.

The four major crops of Malaysia are oil palm, rubber, paddy and coconuts. Coconut seem the least researched and least important to us economically. This scenario must change as the world's agriculture landscape is swayed by different food consumption habits and

healthy life style. Other than the traditional product cobra (coconut oil), virgin coconut oil and coconut water, never thought of before, have elevated to become highly sought after commodities.

Virgin coconut oil is the fastest growing product with a high value niche market due to its health benefits. Coconut water is another fast growing new beverage with a rapid expanding new market at 150 per cent annual increment. Sales to America are over USD 350 million. Brazil is the leading exporting country; Philippines being a keen second. Coconut water contains proteins, amino acids, sugars, vitamins, biological growth factors, and enzymes that enhance anti - aging, healthy cell growth and rehydration.

Other coconut products are coconut flour, coconut milk/cream/powder, products derived from the sap that oozes from cut stalks of coconut inflorescences are coconut sugar (gula melaka), jaggery, vinegar, honey, syrup and fresh *Neera* [(palm nectar) which is declared by Indians as the healthiest most freshest drink on earth], coconut shell charcoal and activated carbon, coir products; not forgetting coconut trunks are used in rural bridges. The coconut product market is extremely positive.

Coconut palms are found in over ninety countries in the tropics and sub-tropics, covering an area of about 12 million ha. Some thirty-five countries are commercial coconut producers. The top five producers are India, Indonesia, Philippines, Brazil and Sri Lanka. Papua New Guinea is the largest producer amongst Pacific states. Malaysia ranks 14 with

a total coconut area of 82 900 ha (Peninsula 54 200, Sabah 16 300, Sarawak 12 400). Among the growers, 94 per cent are smallholders, with an average holding size of about 1 ha. The area under coconut palms is decreasing at an annual rate of 2.9 per cent in Malaysia. In terms of nut production fortunately, it is compensated by some newly planted high yielding hybrid varieties.

It may not be easy to expand the cultivation of coconuts due to the constraint of land availability. According to APCC, Malaysia has 50 per cent of its present stands or about 5 million palms that are senile and need to be replanted with high yielding hybrids. Of course hybrid seedlings should be readily available and at a reasonable cost. We heard at the 14th ISP National Seminar that the cost of the dwarf variety per seedling is RM 5 to RM 15 and MATAG is RM 15 to RM 50. Apart from

acquiring such modern varieties as MAWA, MATA, MYD or PDN (Aromatic Green Dwarf or Pandan), even more important is the implementation of sound scientific based agronomic practices such as appropriate fertiliser applications, irrigation, control of pest and diseases and cover crop establishment. Coconuts can grow in many types of soils, provided they are free-draining and allow aeration and unrestricted root development.

When proper management is instituted, the productivity of coconuts in Malaysia is expected to match the yield of other countries such as India or Cote d'Ivoire which produce 250 to 300 nuts per year per tree. In comparison, our hybrids with limited agronomic inputs are reported to produce 80-150 nuts per year per tree. The yield gap must be closed and close soonest.