A Visit to a Plantation

Posted on

As you travel to Melsiripura, you dissect through a large coconut plantation, lush and green on either side of the road. It is the H L De Mel & Co Plantation, which is over 150 years and spreads across 750 acres. The well-maintained Plantation grows coconut as the primary crop and a multitude of other varieties of crops as well.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe. | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda.



The man-made reservoir provides water for cultivation.

It was Jacob De Mel who started the company in 1870, thereafter his son Sir Henry De Mel continued and expanded the business. A plantation company that had over 6,000 acres, almost 90 percent of its land was taken over by the Government in the 1970s due to the land reform act. Today, the Company has 600 acres in Melsiripura and 150 acres in Chilaw, all owned by the H L De Mel & Co and family members. A couple of estates belong to the family trust and the profits are used for social work. The Plantation consists of a number of estates with interesting names including – Diyathura (meaning water through the trees), Raththarankotuwa (golden estate), Dematagolla, Ragedera, Galpothta, Hevanathenna, and Walpolayaya, which have no specific meaning but are named after the villages. Each estate has good ground

water tables that enable the growth of the crops. The H L De Mel Plantation has over 7,596 plants and trees of types of timber and fruit varieties. A mini forest has also been planted with numerous types of valuable trees including the Mee Tree, which produces oxygen during the day and night. This has been done to ensure that these trees are protected for posterity. Furthermore, each and every estate of the plantation has an area that is of pristine forest and has not been used for cultivation. The Plantation has also planted timber such as teak, mahogany and jak fruit trees along the fences. Teak numbers up to 1,000 trees. Gliricidia trees have also been grown on the Plantation, this tree produces nitrogen and nourishes the soil. 100 Kumbuk trees have also been planted around the man-made reservoirs, which spans three acres. Kumbuk, Karanda and Mee are good trees for water retention.



Romesh De Mel, Managing Director, H L De Mel & Co.



Plucking coconuts with a bamboo stick is an art.



The Plantation is regularly cleaned of undergrowth and well nurtured for replenishment of coconut trees.



The coconut plantation is intercropped with other varieties such as manioc.



The mini forest has a large number of unique and valuable trees.

The primary crop is coconut with a cultivation of 18 acres of paddy as well. The plantation has also diversified into many other crops such as dragon fruit, mango, cashew, pepper, cinnamon, plantains, turmeric, manioc, and areca nut amongst others. As Romesh de Mel, Managing Director explains the aim is to determine the profitable crops and expand these further.

> ***The H L De Mel Plantation has over 7,596 plants and trees of types of timber and fruit varieties.***

The multitude of crops are interspersed with coconut and large areas have been cultivated with these crops. In one estate alone there is five acres of manioc, and further five acres of cashew.

At the H L De Mel & Co plantation, the cashew nuts are not plucked but only those that have fallen to the ground naturally are collected on a daily basis. In most instances certain areas are grown with the other crops on each estate so that there is a good combination of crops.

> ***A model plantation does not mean only the crops but the welfare of the employees and the people of the area as well.***

The TJC Mango variety is grown at all estates at the H L De Mel & Co Plantation. The trees are pruned so that they are at a height, where the mango fruits can be covered with bags to protect from insects. The branches grow horizontally. One tree would produce about 200 fruits and would be productive for about 15 years. Dragon fruits are planted in neat rows amounting to about an acre. The dragon fruit plants will bear fruit about thrice a year but are not considered as a profitable crop as it is a luxury fruit hence it is planted in a smaller area.

About 3,600 cinnamon plants are grown per acre. The area grown differs on each estate. The cinnamon leaves are a good fertilizer for the coconut and for the cinnamon as well. Value addition is done for pepper, turmeric, tamarind and other such crops within the Plantation as well. Mangoes, cinnamon, manioc, pepper, and cashew produce a good harvest and Romesh de Mel says that these crops are profitable as there is a demand. Furthermore, “As the Government is encouraging export there will be many people buying these crops to do value addition”, he said.The coconut trees are of various maturity levels and replanting has been done as well. The lifetime of a coconut tree is about 70 years, with a maximum productivity period of 45 years. Therefore, at the H L De Mel & Co Plantation an undergrowth of coconut plants is always nurtured so there is a replenishment of the trees. The harvesting of coconuts is done over a period of 45 days, with 30 days’ intervals in between. Harvesting is done with long bamboo and it cannot be done by everyone. They are specially trained for that purpose. Trees reaching up to 80ft are harvested using bamboo and for those that are taller, a person will climb the tree. There are systems for the harvesting of nuts, collecting the nuts, transporting using the tractor, heaping the coconuts into mounds and then counting, where the good nuts are separated and prepared to be taken to the auction. Those that are rejected are used to make copra.

The Plantation has its own copra kilns, which produces the copra number one variety. These are used for the making of coconut oil. Romesh de Mel explains, “We want to make a model plantation so that we can encourage people to come and visit and engage in coconut tours. We want them to see the growing of coconut and other crops”. He further elaborated, “We are happy that the President, Prime Minister and the Government are placing emphasis on agriculture and coconut cultivation. We want to continue to improve our Plantation.” A model plantation does not mean only the crops but the welfare of the employees and the people of the area as well. Employees are provided with housing facilities that include water and electricity. Social service plus animal welfare is done on a large scale. In order

to provide employment for the women of the village as a self employment initiative, a restaurant was also established by H L De Mel & Co.



Cashew is grown in five acres.



Ready to collect TJC mangoes.



Dragon fruits are planted in an area of about an acre.



Transport modes of yesteryear.



The restaurant that has been provided as a self-employment initiative to the women of the village.