Intercropping under coconuts in Sri Lanka*

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Abstract. Coconut is a major commercial crop of Sri Lanka. Growing a number of other crops in association with coconuts is a widespread practice in all coconut-growing areas of the country. The rationale for the practice is that other crops can profitably be grown between or under the coconuts during the different growth stages of the palms and thus the overall productivity of the land under this long-duration crop can substantially be increased.

The paper gives a concise account of the practice in Sri Lanka indicating the crops most commonly grown as intercrops, arrangement of different crops and early research results on the productivity of the intercrops and their effect on coconuts. Adequate supplies of water and labour are the two major inputs needed for the success of the system. Drought, lack of funds, price instability, lack of technical know-how on intercrop management and problems of timely availability of inputs are the major constraints experienced by farmers in expanding intercropping. Research on both biological and socio-economic aspects is needed to overcome these constraints and extend this potentially attractive system.

1. Introduction

Coconut (Cocos nucifera L.) is cultivated in about 400,000 ha or 25% of the total cultivated area of Sri Lanka. It is the most widely cultivated plantation crop of the island nation, the other major two being tea (244,916 ha) and rubber (222,311 ha), and is thus second only to rice (874,221 ha) in terms of the area under the crop. Although coconut is grown in all the districts of Sri Lanka, about 70% of the area under the crop is concentrated in the ‘COCONUT TRIANGLE’ formed by the districts of Kurunegala, Puttalam, Gampaha and Colombo in the central west coast (Figure 1). Other important coconut areas include the districts of Kalutara, Galle, Matara and Hambantota accounting for about 15% of the total area. The rest of the area is found mostly in the small home gardens in other districts.

It is a wide-spread practice in all coconut growing areas of Sri Lanka to grow a large number of other crops in association with coconuts. The practice

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has been encouraged by the Government of Sri Lanka since 1973 by introducing several subsidy schemes. This paper examines the situation with respect of coconut intercropping in Sri Lanka and summarizes the results.