
EDITORIAL

Subsidiary Food Crops

THE Committee appointed recently by Government to study certain aspects of the cost-of-living problem in Ceylon reports that subsidiary food items such as pulses, potatoes, onions and chillies figure very prominently in the household budget of the average Ceylon family, and that they will have to be made available at reasonably low prices if any substantial reduction in the cost of living in Ceylon is to be effected by Government. Ceylon's annual imports of dry chillies, onions, potatoes and pulses, which have increased considerably in recent years, drain away over 45 million rupees in foreign exchange. Except in the case of red onions, domestic production meets only a negligible fraction of the Island's requirements of these commodities so widely used in practically every Ceylonese home. Even in the case of red onions, the island's requirements have to be imported from India each year for about three months during the North East Monsoon period when owing to the heavy rains yields are low. This would also be hardly necessary if the difficulties experienced in storing sufficient quantities of onions produced during the peak season without loss of weight and quality through excessive driage and sprouting are overcome.

In the past several attempts have been made to induce farmers, particularly in the dry zone, to undertake large-scale cultivation of chillies and onions. However, there has been no appreciable increase in the production of dry chillies. Although the Wanni villager has been cultivating chillies as a *chena* crop, the varieties grown do not produce a cured product that compares favourably in quality with the Tuticorin chilli.

Tuticorin chilli is a crop that requires intensive cultivation for success. In the Jaffna peninsula, Tuticorin chillies are raised in small irrigated plots in rotation with the other crops, and the yields average over 12 cwt. per acre due to the very high standard of cultivation. However, the spread of the chilli leaf-curl complex caused by virus, thrip and mite attacks in recent years has proved a major obstacle

to extended cultivation of chillies. Trials now in progress to select varieties resistant to leaf curl show promise although the new resistant selections lack the pungency of the Tuticorin chilli and take a day or two longer to dry. It is hoped that in the near future selections of high quality resistant to leaf curl will be available for large-scale cultivation.

However, with the restriction of imports of these commodities to conserve foreign exchange, it becomes necessary for local production to be stepped up immediately. In regard to potato, this number of the *Tropical Agriculturist* clearly indicates the vast potentialities for local production. Dr. Pushkaranath, whose final report is published in full in this number, has clearly shown that the expansion of Ceylon's potato acreage is now more a managerial problem than a technical one. With the progress made in the production of the requirements of quality seed potatoes and the development of satisfactory cultivation techniques, it should be possible to ensure the cultivation of the required acreage in the areas defined as suitable for the production of the crops without the hazards of bacterial wilt and other troublesome diseases.

Prospects for dry chilli production on a large scale are however not so bright at present in view of the low margin of profit and the high requirements of labour both for cultivation and for harvesting. Cultivators prefer to pick chillies green because of the prevailing high prices for green chillies, which when dried produce only one third by weight of dry chillies. They believe that early picking stimulates the production of more chillies by the plant. There is however little doubt that well drained paddy land in the dry zone that does not receive adequate quantities of irrigation water for rice during the Yala season can be deployed for raising chillies and onions which require less water than rice ; but it is not so certain whether attempts to cultivate large units of 1,000 acres and over will be a success as the problem of finding the necessary labour at the appropriate time will present serious difficulties. Even if the preparatory tillage, planting and inter-cultivation are mechanised it would still be necessary for harvesting to be done by hand. Therefore, it seems that the most prudent approach is to encourage individual farmers to cultivate under irrigation small extents that can be managed by the family itself, and to ensure that the necessary acreage is made up by such small individual units. Financial assistance in the form of a subsidy for the construction of wells in highland allotments would be an incentive to increased production of these subsidiary food crops.

SUBSIDIARY FOOD CROPS

It is well to remember that the cultivation of chillies and onions in paddy fields is not an economic proposition in *Maha* because of the excessive wet soil conditions in the tract, and that even in *Yala* these crops can only be cultivated in a section of the paddy area in which the soil is friable and well drained. Nevertheless there is no reason why self-sufficiency in these subsidiary food crops should not be achieved in the near future. It is only necessary to wean the *Wanni* cultivator from his traditional dependence on paddy as the sole crop to be grown under irrigation.