

FROM THE SEED TO THE CUP

THE STORY OF THE TEA PLANT



Millions of people are engaged in the cultivation, plucking and manufacture of Tea in India, Ceylon, Pakistan, British East Africa and Indonesia.

Each Tea estate is a separate little community, often having its own hospital, its own amenities, and also community rice fields for the employees. Most of the labourers spend their whole lives on the one estate, being eventually pensioned off in their old age.

Tea is normally grown from seed, but because the Tea flower is generally cross-fertilised, mixed types of plants may be produced which will have an ill-effect upon the bulk and quality of the leaf.

Vegetative propagation—that is the raising of plants from leaf cuttings—is now being tried as a means of producing a pure and uniform population of plants. Research work during recent years has shown that this method is practicable and many Tea gardens are experimenting with a view to using it commercially.

Selected Tea trees are allowed to grow to a height of 20 or 30 feet as seed producers for the whole estate.

After the seed has matured and fallen to the ground it is picked up, and carefully sieved and dried, and is packed in charcoal, dried clay or a mixture of both, in boxes, for transportation.

Very often the seed is germinated in damp sand pits. When the shell cracks, the seed is planted about half an inch deep with the eye downwards. The seed beds are about six feet wide, separated by narrow paths, and are watered in case of a dry spell.

Seedlings are transplanted when they are between six and eighteen months old, according to prevailing climatic conditions.

In India it is the practice to lift the plant with a clod of earth, before it is carefully transplanted to a new clearing, but in Ceylon and Java, on the other hand, the plants are often transplanted devoid of any clod.

It is most essential that the ground be kept free of weeds.

The Tea bushes require particular attention when they are young, for weak or under-nourished bushes are always susceptible to blights. Blister Blight for instance, is a matter of grave concern in India, Ceylon and Indonesia. This fungus affects the young leaves.

Probably the most serious insect menace is the *Helopeltis*—the “Tea mosquito”—which feeds on the sap of the young leaves. However, D.D.T. used as a spray or dust, kills the insects, and keeps the bushes immune for a period after treatment.

The leaves from which Tea is made, grow on bushes, which are periodically pruned to a height of about three feet, and in this way the energy of the bush is concentrated in producing more and finer leaves.

The leaves, which are green and tender, are plucked every ten days or so by experienced workers, who, although they sometimes pluck as much as 60 lb. of green leaf a day, have to examine every shoot before selecting it. Plucking is an expert job, great care being needed to ensure that no stalk or coarse material reaches the factory. Incidentally, it requires about four pounds of leaf to provide one pound of the finished article.

Usually the leaf is not ready for plucking until the the bush is about five years old.

When the leaves reach the factory they are spread thinly on long canvas shelves and allowed to dry for 24 hours—hot air generally being used to aid this drying process.

This process alone, reduces the weight of the leaves by half.

After drying, the leaves are put into rollers, which break up the leaf cells and allow the juices to escape. It is during this process that Tea is given its peculiar well-known twist.



Ship ahoy!
Lillian Ballangarry and Jane Mumbler spend a day rowing on the pretty Nambucca River.