

The bulk of the exports from the Cook Islands is from trees which have been subject to little, if any, cultivation, having simply been allowed to grow naturally from seedlings.

Generally speaking, neither the location of the trees nor their size and shape allows of the proper application of modern methods of cultivation. Fungoid growths attack the fruit and this results in too large a proportion of dark-coloured fruit being produced. The quality of this fruit is not necessarily affected, but the discoloration detracts from its appearance and seriously affects its market value.

Many of the trees are too old, and their cutting-out, if done as part of a replanting scheme, would be an advantage.

A further handicap to this trade is the fact that the advantage gained in juice content is offset by the thin skin of the native orange, which is much more susceptible to damage in handling, packing, and transport than most varieties of cultivated oranges.

The necessity for replanting in areas capable of proper cultivation is becoming appreciated, more especially by European growers, but also by the more progressive Native growers.

With a view to extending the orange-export season, a number of growers have imported and planted under proper methods well known early- and late-fruited varieties of young cultivated trees, principally from Australia and California. These imported trees, it is calculated, will yield earlier and later crops than the native trees, thus considerably extending the present export season. The full result of this experimental introduction of new varieties cannot be fully ascertained pending the time when these trees will come into full bearing.

It is stated very generally that the quality of the citrus fruits grown on Rarotonga has deteriorated in recent years. This we find to be probably true, though not to the extent that has sometimes been alleged. The position seems rather to be that the competition of cultivated oranges from other countries, carefully graded, processed, packed, and marketed has put the uncultivated native orange at a disadvantage.

HARVESTING.

Because of the height, shape, and difficulty of access to many orange-trees, the harvesting of the crop is a laborious task. The recognized and commendable practice of clipping the fruit from the stem cannot be applied to a large proportion of the trees, as even ladders will not reach to the topmost boughs. The irregularity in the location of the trees, together with their remoteness and inaccessibility, adds considerably to the cost of harvesting.

TRANSPORT TO PACKING-SHEDS.

Much of the fruit when picked is carried on the shoulders, or on ponies or wagons, for long distances over bush tracks or rough roads before being finally delivered to the district packing-sheds.

An improvement in the roads adjacent to and leading to plantations would be a definite advantage. The Delegation was given to understand it was the policy of the Administration, where growers were prepared to provide the labour, to provide food and the necessary materials to Natives who undertook such work. If the Native growers would take fuller advantage of those conditions, much-needed road improvement could be brought about, and encouragement should be given them to do so.

PACKING.

The present system of district packing-sheds has served a useful purpose, and, although a vast improvement on former methods, is nevertheless inadequate for present and future requirements. A recommendation appears later in this report.

INSPECTION.

The system of inspection and the manner in which it is carried out is in the opinion of the Delegation a distinctly weak link. Briefly described, inspection of oranges takes place in seven district packing-sheds established by the growers at their cost at various points around the Island. Each shed is controlled by a Native shed committee, usually composed of elders of the district, who watch the fruit passing over the "inspection run" of the machine graders in an effort to detect the defective fruit. The facilities provided by the grading-machines for this purpose are inadequate, and the inspectors may not have the quickness of eye and hand to detect and reject, nor does the casual nature of their appointment tend to the efficiency required.

A further flaw is the fact that these committees handle their own fruit and the fruit of their families and friends—and human nature is prone to frailties.

It is true that the whole of the packing in each shed is under the supervision of a Government Inspector, but it is quite impossible to exercise strict supervision over the various activities of handling in detail in all of the seven sheds, and much has to be left to the Native assistants themselves.

One result is that too high a percentage of undergrade fruit is exported, which causes heavy losses on account of needless handling, repacking, &c. If the hazard of this wastage is reduced, one of the causes militating against a higher price to the grower will be removed.

BANANA INDUSTRY.

Many existing banana plantations are situated in valleys running up to the high rocky hills which form the centre of the Island of Rarotonga. Difficulties of transport arise which are hard to overcome, and cause serious damage to the fruit in handling between the plantations and packing-sheds.

The reasons generally given for planting in such inaccessible areas are—(1) The exhaustion of the soil on the lower levels, and (2) the need for shelter which the deep gorges provide.