

A LADDER FOR COCONUTS

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THE proposal to establish an isolated seed garden for coconuts was first made by the late Sir Marcus Fernando at the inauguration of the Coconut Research Scheme. His idea was that by establishing an isolated block of high-yielding palms, produced from seednuts, obtained from artificially-pollinated mother palms, it would be possible to allow free natural pollination and so produce high-grade seednuts in large quantities.

For 22 years the proposal has hung fire and little has been done because of the difficulty in reaching the crown of a tall coconut palm. Artificial pollination is a skilled technique, requiring intelligence, and cannot be done by an ordinary toddy tapper. Members of the staff of the Institute were naturally reluctant to do work which might result in a serious accident to themselves, because ordinary ladders are not rigid enough and they cannot be satisfactorily supported against a swaying coconut palm often leaning over at a considerable angle from the vertical. The idea of using a Bosun's cradle was rejected because it was considered to be too hazardous and because the fitting might damage or injure the soft top portions of the trunks of the palms.

For purposes of training and trial, a ladder of unique design has been constructed by Mr. H. W. J. Peiris, of Messrs. H. D. J. Peiris & Co. of Colombo, on the basis of suggestions made by officers of the Institute.

The ladder is built on the principle of a steel crane with a turn-table and a counter-weight on the opposite side to compensate for the weight of the fully-extended ladder with a man on its top platform. The escalator ladder, corresponding to the lifting arm of a crane, consists of a four-sectioned telescopic assembly, extendable to a height of 45 feet. The ladder, when fully extended, can also be raised or lowered to any angle up to 75 degrees or it can be completely revolved on a horizontal plane.

The unit is mounted on a sturdy chassis on pneumatic wheels, so that it can be drawn behind a tractor to any part of the estate. The machine can thus be placed in the centre of a square of palms so that four palms can be dealt with simultaneously. The scientist, if he is nervous, can stand on the platform inside a guard rail and can be raised as the ladder is extended upwards.

This ladder will not only be useful for artificial pollination work, it can also be used for the experimental spraying of the crowns of the palms against pests and diseases; for cleaning up the crowns of palms; for spraying the leaves with special plant nutrients; and for the purpose of taking close-up or top photographs.

It is believed that this is the first ladder of its type that has ever been used on coconuts.