SISAL.

NOTES ON THE SISAL INDUSTRY

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Quite a number of African farmers have visited the Accra Sisal Plantation and have shown a certain amount of interest in this new industry. Some have stated intentions of starting sisal farms in the vicinity of the existing plantation, when Government is prepared to guarantee that their crop will be purchased from them when mature.

In order that these farmers shall benefit from the experience gained on this plantation, it is thought that a few remarks on the best methods, etc. might prove useful.

At present farms should be selected near to the sisal plantation so that the cost of transporting leaves to the Government factory will be as low as possible. There is plenty of good land in this district which would enable farmers to start on a fairly big scale.

Having selected the site the first thing to be done is the clearing of the land. One man ought to clear an acre in 14 days, or takingwages at 1/6*d.* a day, for £1 per acre. It all depends, of course, on the nature of the land, amount of bush, etc., but even if half the farm was bush it should be cleared on the average for £1 an acre.

When the land has been cleared, large suckers (young plants) are then planted out. The best spacing is 8 ft. by 6 ft., or 907 plants to the acre.

One man should be able to plant 1 acre in 8 days, or at a cost of 12/-. The farm should be weeded twice in the first year, and once in the following 6 months, making three weedings in the first eighteen months. After this the sisal will commence to shade out the under-growth to a great extent, and weeding is in any case extremely difficult and expensive. One man should be able to weed one acre in 10 days at a cost of 15/- or 45/- for the three weedings.

When the plants are 2½ years old harvesting should commence. This is done by cutting the lower leaves from the plant, leaving about 9 in the centre. One man in a day should cut, bundle and carry the cropped leaves from 60 plants to a dumping ground near the light railway. The area planted should not at its furthest point be more than 250 yards from the nearest railway line, or the cost of carrying becomes excessively high.

One man cutting 60 plants a day would cut an acre in 15 days, or at a cost of 22/6*d.* This only applies to the first cutting: the subsequent cuttings should cost a third of this sum each, or say 8/- per acre. Taking four cuttings this would make a total of £2. 6*s.* 6*d.* for each acre, or 1 man working for 30 days, during the bearing life of the plant.

Cost of bringing one acre into bearing and of harvesting the crop would then be as under :—

Clearing	...	£1.	0s.	0d.
Planting	...		12	0
Weeding	...	2	5	0
Cutting	...	2	6	6
	Total	£ 6	3	6

or approximate 1 man working 82 days during the life of that plant.

One acre of sisal should produce in its life at least 25 cwt. of fibre, or 41 tons of leaf. (3% fibre in leaf).

It is too early to give a definite figure at which leaf could be purchased from small growers, but the probable amount would be approximately 10/- per ton for leaf. This on the figures above would mean a return of £20. 10s. 0d. per acre, and a profit of £14. 6s. 6d. for about 2½ months' work. Sisal can be worked at any time of the year, and consequently need not interfere with a farmer's normal food production.

The most useful area of land a small farmer should work would be 9 acres, divided into 3 blocks of 3 acres each. One block would be planted the first year, one in the second year, and one in the third year. In the fourth year the first block should be replanted, in the 5th year the second block replanted and so on.

This method ensures that there is always an acre in bearing. Replanting plants is done by putting in a sucker exactly between two of the existing plants so that the young sisal is nearly mature when the old plants are dying.

Farmers who have labourers at their disposal could, of course, plant more than this, according to the number of labourers available.

Considering the very generous proposal of Government to supply suckers free of charge, to transport to the factory the cropped leaves and to buy for ready cash the crops, it would be very surprising if the African farmers of the Accra district did not take advantage of such an opportunity as this. The advice of the Government officers on the sisal plantation will always be available on all matters connected with the sisal industry.

The following figures from the existing plantation may be of interest

Last financial year from August to March 136 tons of fibre were produced. With a full supply of labour the production cost per ton was from £17. 17s. 8d. to £19. 7s. 0d., roughly averaging £18. 10s. 0d. Capital redemption, interest and depreciation are not included in this.

The labour supply failed last year, and the factory was compelled to work half time for some months, which sent up the production cost to the average of £27 per ton for the 8 months.

Prices realized in England were £40.—£43. 10. 0d. for Grade 1 per ton, £38—£40. for Grade 2, and £30. for tow. From particulars to hand ocean freight, brokerage, insurance, storage, landing dues and various selling charges cost £6. 15s. 0d. per ton after the fibre leaves the plantation.

It will therefore be seen that with a full supply of labour a profit of up to £18. 5s. 0d. per ton was being realized.—The Journal of the Gold Coast Agricultural and Commercial Society, Vol. IV, No. 2.