

DO NOT USE SEED FROM HYBRID COCONUT PALMS AS PLANTING MATERIAL

By R.M. Brook,* Agronomist, Bubia Agriculture Research Centre, Lae

Many farmers and extension workers have asked the question: If seed from a hybrid coconut is planted, do you get hybrid seedlings?

Some smallholders have bought only a few hybrid coconuts seeds or seedlings, because they believe that if they wait until the palms are bearing, they will get many more hybrid nuts for planting. Unfortunately, you cannot get good hybrid seedlings from your own hybrid coconuts. The reasons for this are explained here.

Hybrid coconut seed is produced by crossing dwarf and tall coconuts. Pollen from selected varieties of tall palm is used to fertilize dwarf palm flowers.

Dwarf coconut palms are short and bear large numbers of small nuts. When unripe the nuts are either orange or yellow, depending on the variety. Tall coconut palms can grow up to 30 m tall. They usually bear fewer but much larger nuts than dwarfs. The colour of unripe nuts can vary from green to brown.

The hybrid crosses selected for distribution combine the best qualities of both parents. These hybrid coconut palms will grow to medium height and bear large numbers of large nuts, of the same colour as the tall parent.

If nuts from hybrid palms are planted, you get what is called a 'hybrid swarm', where the palms show a mixture of characters from the original dwarf and tall grandparents. Some will be short and others taller or intermediate in height; numbers, sizes and colours of the nuts will vary from palm to palm. Thus, a plantation of these seednuts will not be high-yielding.

Probably many growers are put off buying



A very productive hybrid coconut palm only 5 years after planting at the Lowlands Agricultural Experiment Station, Keravat.

many hybrid coconut seednuts at one time because they are quite expensive. However, you should realise that by spending about K100 per hectare you will get a highly productive plantation that should bear for many years.

From such a hybrid coconut plantation, the grower will start to get back the money he spent on planting far more quickly than if traditional tall palms had been planted. Hybrid coconut palms start bearing several months sooner than tall palms and soon yield over twice as much copra.

* Present address: Department of Agriculture, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England.