THE HEALING SAW

J. R. Somerville*

When the writer started to clean prune his tea back in 1960, very uncomplimentary remarks were heard about the practice. Despite these, the tea has not died and is a lot more vigorous than before we took the saw to it.

I wish to support the articles written by Messrs A. D. Scott, G. B. Middleton and S. P. Vytilingam (1) on the subject, but like Mr Scott, the writer lays no claim to having originated this style of pruning.

The writer's estate is situated in Uva with a decennial average of 70 inches of rainfall per annum which is badly distributed. The elevation of the estate is from 2,500 to 5,000 ft but most of it is around the 3,200 ft mark.

In my opinion, the main cause of knotty, gnarled and twisted rotten frames, is the general lack of money expended on and supervision given to pruning since the beginning of the war. When the war started all the young planters left Ceylon, and the older remaining men were compelled to look after vast acreages, which, of necessity, tended to reduce the standard of supervision. Prevailing labour factors did not help matters. By the time things had got back to normal in 1947, blister blight had arrived and this made it impossible to do any type of clean pruning until satisfactory methods of protection had been adopted to control the disease. This takes us to the Nineteen Fifties when the T.R.I. did not recommend the use of saws in the pruning of tea. Now that clean pruning has to be done, considerable opposition is experienced as labourers have got used to light pruning and when asked to do a clean prune they find it very hard work.

We should, I consider, be worrying far more about the standard of the work than cost. As regards the latter, I think the following mathematical exercise will prove illuminating.

Say the average estimate of labourers per acre for the normal type of so-called medium prune is 20. Suppose the pruning cycle is four years and suppose that there is an average of 3,500 bushes per acre. This is a very high figure for old seedling tea. In this hypothetical case the bush kanak would be 3,500 bushes divided by 18=195 bushes per labourer. This allows one knife keeper (*Katti karan*) and 1 kangany for every acre, which is very generous. Suppose, as an extreme example, we set the task at 125 bushes per labourer for a completely clean prune, as advocated by the Superintendent of Alton Estate. This will need 28 labourers per acre, plus the kangany and knife keeper an increase of 10 labourers per acre.

10 labourers per acre @ 2/53 = Rs. 25.30.

Rs. 25/30 divided by 48 months = .53 cts. per month of cycle.

It will be seen from these figures that the extra cost, even if it cost 40 labourers per acre, is infinitesimal when taken over a cycle, and that we are really cutting our noses to spite our faces with the present concentration on kanak instead on standard.

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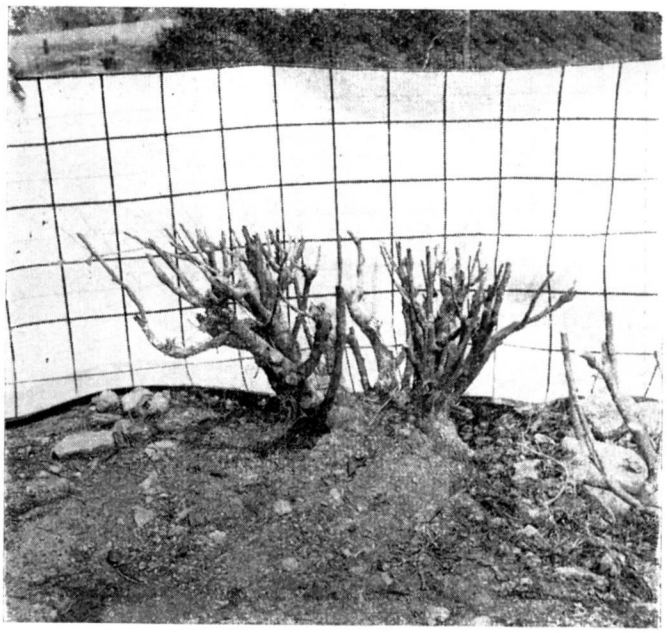

Figure No. 1.—Bush on Ury Group with leaves removed by light prune. Background grid in 6″ divisions.

Figure No. 2.—Same bush after application of 'Healing Saw' by writer.

Figure No. 3.—A bush on Wewesse 6 months after pruning. Note strong growth from the base of the bush.

Figure No. 4—A typical bush two years after pruning.

Figure No. 5.—A typical bush three years after pruning.

Figure No. 6.—A typical bush four years after pruning.

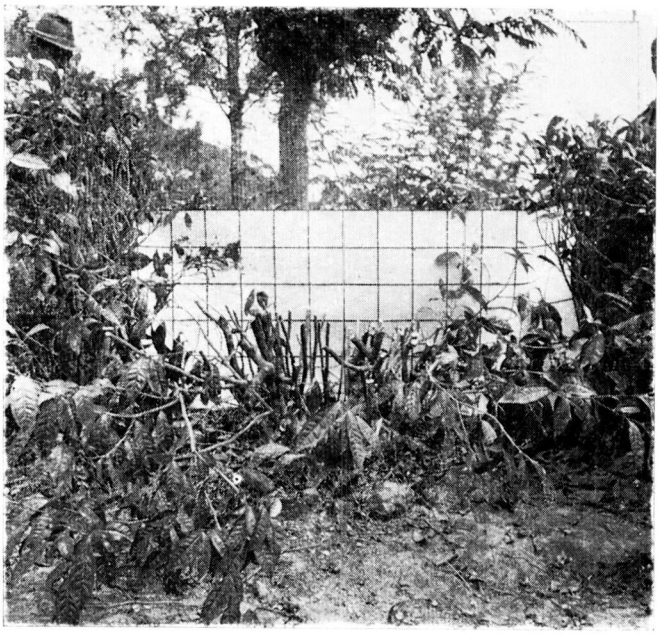

Figure No. 7.—The bush illustrated in Fig. 6 after 2nd rounds of pruning. Note the height of prune against height of neighbouring bushes.

Figure No. 8.—A typical bush one year after second round. Note the dense foliage from ground level.

General Observations

(1) The writer is of opinion that it is better to take one bite at the cherry rather than three, as advocated by one of the writers mentioned. It is far easier to supervise one complete clean prune over one cycle, than spread it over a longer time. (See figures 1 and 2).

(2) There are a considerable number of passengers in each and every field, and if these die under the 'Healing saw', nothing is lost.

(3) It is easier to resupply old tea with good success after a clean prune, as the old bushes are much smaller and do not complete with young supplies. I would suggest CY 9 as an excellent clone for infilling vacancies in old tea.

(4) It is most important that the closest supervision is given to clean pruning, as a repeat performance in the next cycle would mean killing the tea.

(5) This type of pruning is best done either in December/January or May/June. Results on this estate have not been good at other times.

(6) Manuring should be for anticipated yield as one is bound to lose crop on the first year after this type of prune. The writer has applied the standard tea manure at 12 lbs nitrogen for every 100 lbs of estimated crop. This, in practice, has amounted, on the average, to 120 lbs nitrogen per acre per annum including the year of pruning, and was very generous, as the estimate has very closely followed the actual crop harvested.

(7) If the tea has been well manured in the past and the work is carefully supervised and no half branches left, then dieback should be insignificant.

(8) After you have done one complete round of clean pruning it is absolutely imperative that the closest supervision should be given to the next prune. This pruning should be into the clean new wood, just below the previous tipping level. All cross branches should be removed and if a few knots were left from the previous prune these should be very carefully sawn out. If you are not careful you will either get back another gnarled twisted frame in a few year's time or the pruners will cut off all the nice new wood you have grown.

Subsequent prunes should be clean but fairly high, with the judicious use of the saw. It should never be necessary to have to completely hard prune your tea again. The writer uses a special gang for the saw work in the second round pruning, and every knot removed is put in a sack and inspected by him every evening. In this way one can see what they are removing. (see figures 6, 7 and 8).

(9) The writer has maintained a very heavy cover of shade trees, both high and low, while the cycle of clean pruning was in progress. This protects the tea from the high winds experienced on this estate and also limits sun scorch in the tea pruned in May and June. Excessive shade is now being removed as it is felt that this has served its useful purpose. The only dieback experienced was in a field from which the shade had been removed prior to the application of the 'Healing Saw'. It would appear that hard pruning of tea from which most of the shade has been removed might be dangerous in Uva below 4,000 feet.

(10) *A word of warning about V.P. Clearings*

It is imperative that a clean natural frame is made at the time of the first prune, as hard pruning of V.P. at a later date may not be possible without severe casualties. One must make sure that all cross branches are removed, as well as anything else which impedes the free flow of sap. One will never get the very high yields which we all expect form V.P. clearings, unless the bushes are kept in first class condition.

Conclusion

Some people may ask: 'Would it not be easier to pull out the tea and replant?'. The answer to this question is comparatively simple. A reasonable maximum acreage to replant per annum is 2%, and at this rate it would take 50 years to cover the whole of the estate. Something must be done to rejuvenate the old tea while you are replanting, or your yield will start dropping sharply to uneconomical levels before the new clearings can take over. If high yielding fields are carefully rejuvenated and the vacancies filled in with new supplies, an economic yield should easily be maintained until this tea is ready to be replanted. Even poor yielding tea can benefit from rejuvenation, but the work will not be so rewarding. These fields should really be replanted under the Tea Subsidy Scheme.

I should like to thank the Manager of Ury Group for lending me a bush to butcher. I hope it survives! I would also like to thank Mr Lucian Tillekeratne, District Advisory Officer, Uva, for his interest in this work, and finally Mr D. J. M. Hettiarachchi of the T.R.I. for the excellent photographs taken by him.

References

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