

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PROBLEM OF GROWING PINEAPPLES FOR MARKET.



FEW years ago the pineapple was extensively cultivated on the coral keys of Florida. The natives cut the forest, burnt the wood and debris on the ground and planted "pines" in the ashes. I protested against this method because it destroyed the humus, and ordered all wood and brush burnt in piles on my land. My man, a Bahaman negro, well versed in the pineapple business, insisted that the land must be "hot" for pines, that they needed the ashes, and that if the burning was done in a moist time only the surface rubbish would be destroyed. Time proved that he was right. These pineapple fields were weeded once or twice a year, no fertilizer was applied, but a heavy yield was secured in spite of the sparseness of the soil and the crude nature of cultivation.

But what a mess it was at harvest time! They commenced to break pines in early summer. The plants were full of spines and more than waist high. Canvas mittens were necessary. It was usually hot and the mosquitoes were a pest beyond description. The negroes toted the pines to the boat in baskets on their heads, over rough rocks along narrow, well-worn paths. There is uncut land left on these keys and a railroad is now in operation in a part of this region, but the pineapple business is practically dead. With a field of pines and a patch of limes and wrecking on the side these Key people were once well-to-do and their lands were valuable.

Further up the State along the East Coast there is a long stretch of sand dune country. It was covered with a sparse

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growth of pine trees and the soil was naturally sterile. A balanced ration of fertilizer was applied by the pineapple growers and immense crops were produced, a few acres yielding a fine income. Of late, returns have been small and many growers have quit the business. Over in the Bahama Islands it is the same story.

In Cuba there is a lot of soil especially adapted to pineapple culture. An owner of a young citrus grove plants pineapples between the trees and thus receives a quick return. The Cuban people are fond of the pineapple or "la piña" as they call it. It is ground fine, sweetened and mixed with cracked ice. It is sold in this form at all refreshment stands and is certainly one of the most refreshing drinks imaginable on a hot day. If served throughout the United States in this way it would soon become popular. This would increase the consumption of this fruit to an enormous extent.

One hears complaints of small returns on pines even in Cuba. In fact it looks like a case of overproduction. The pineapple is well known in the North, is largely canned and relished by everybody. We import twelve million dollars' worth of bananas every year, but the pineapple, coming only at a special season and not having the filling food value of the banana, is at a disadvantage. The pineapple suffers severely in the process of transportation. It is usually picked too green. A pine is at its best when it ripens on the plant. A ripe pine may be located in the patch by the fragrance which spreads far and wide. A rat may have eaten one side but you will find the other side very delicious.

Good drainage seems essential to the pineapple and it is no doubt for this reason that it does so well in sandy soil. In the Hawaiian Islands they grow pines on a stiff soil, the favorite variety being the smooth Cayenne.

The pineapple is a strictly tropical fruit needing lots of warmth, and, although it will grow on sterile, sandy soil, it must be carefully and abundantly fed with fertilizer. The food it needs is rich—such as cottonseed meal, unleached tobacco dust and dried blood and bone.

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Although the pineapple is referred to as a semi air-plant, since it belongs with a group of epiphytes, it must have something more than air to live on. Water often stands in little pockets at the base of the leaves. In this are often the dead bodies of insects and it is quite likely that the plant secures some sustenance in this way. It is a very shallow rooter and the roots must have air. I have known pineapples to actually sucker themselves out of the ground and have found them resting very loosely in the fluffy humus which covers the rocks on the Florida Keys. Although I have no means of positively knowing, I believe Florida produces one and one-half million crates of pines a year. Cuba probably exceeds this amount, also the Bahama Islands. This places the pine in the front rank with other staple fruits.

The Red Spanish is the chief commercial variety. It multiplies well, is hardier and ships better than any other sort known to the writer. The Porto Rico is a close second.

The pineapple is not seriously troubled by disease and in spite of the small returns it is still a favorite crop with many small farmers. It is easily reproduced from slips and suckers. Now and then a fertile seed is produced. Pines may be grown from rattoons which spring from the root, suckers which grow on the stem higher up, slips which grow at the base of the fruit, crown slips which grow at the base of the crown, and from the crown itself. In this district slips from the base of the fruit are ordinarily used. The bottom of the slip should be cut smooth with a sharp knife and the stem trimmed. There is less danger of a trouble called "tangle root."

Canning factories use many pines, but many go to waste that could be easily converted into commercial alcohol. It is one of the fruits which does not lend itself to wine manufacture but would probably yield a good cordial. The pineapple, it is claimed, contains a ferment similar to the ferment in the papaw which aids digestion. In the East the fiber of the leaf is extensively used for cloth manufacture. This cloth is as delicate and beautiful as silk. The fiber is used for nets, thread for sewing, etc., and although very fine it is strong. I have often wondered why an extensive industry in this line has not developed in the West

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Indies. A pineapple field in dry weather, like a field of cane, is very combustible.

The scientific name of the pineapple is now *Ananas ananas*, which is also a common Spanish name for the plant although piña is much more frequently used. I have often thought that ananas would be a better common name for it than pineapple. It is, of course, nothing like an apple and was so called probably because it faintly resembles in shape the pine cone. We are calling grapefruit, pomelo; alligator pear, avocado; why not call the pineapple ananas?

It appears from present conditions that in pineapple culture, in spite of the duty, Western Cuba has the advantage. When solid trainloads of pines sweep by from Cuba over the Florida East Coast Railway, and when his returns come in, the Florida pineapple grower realizes that he has a competitor to the south of him and that he lives at a way station on a West Indian trunk line.



THE SUNDERSHA MANGO, ONE OF THE LATEST TO RIPEN.
(PHOTO BY KAUFMAN.)