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Price behavior, consumer preference and factors determining methods of preserving arecanut (*Areca catechu*)

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Chewing of betel along with arecanut (*Areca catechu*) kernel is a habit among the working-class and the peasants of our country. Arecanut is a seasonal crop but its consumption is continuous. The objectives of this study were to examine changes of arecanut prices, consumer preference for arecanut products such as ripened fruits, water-preserved fruits (*madapuwak*) and dried fruits (*karunka*) and factors determining the production of the different products. The study was carried out in the Dambulla village in the Rambukkana Divisional Secretariat division. Thirty arecanut growers were interviewed in the Dambulle village to study consumer preference and factors determining the production of different arecanut products. Ten arecanut dealers (five from Rambukkana and five from Alawwa) were interviewed in order to examine price behavior and the distribution of different products from August 2009 to July 2010.

The harvesting season of arecanuts commences in October where the average price of a fruit was in the range of 70 - 80 cents. The peak season of arecanuts is from December and February when prices fall to an average of 40 - 50 cents per fruit. During the declining phase between March and April the arecanut prices remained high at Rs. 1.50-1.60 per fruit. Almost all the arecanut consumers preferred to chew fresh kernels of ripened fruits. Estate workers preferred semi-mature fruits. The arecanut dealers in Rambukkana and Alawwa carried out sorting activities and sent 40 % of their collection as semi-mature fruits to the up country and mid country regions for estate workers. Water-preserved arecanut was preferred by consumers in the northern and north western regions and 70 % of this product was sent to those areas. In the absence of fresh ripened fruits, consumers in other regions were also compelled to consume water-preserved products. Almost all the consumers preferred *karunka* during off-season of fresh ripened fruits. Water preservation commenced when the arecanut prices became lower during the peak season. When the prices of arecanuts were still low and the fruits were sufficiently preserved in water, farmers sought alternative methods of preservation viz. drying. The different products of arecanut were made depending on the availability of the raw material, prevailing price and the prevalence of rainy or sunny weather.

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