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*About the Institute*

The Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, a research division of Carnegie Mellon University, specializes in the history of botany and all aspects of plant science and serves the international scientific community through research and documentation. To this end, the Institute acquires and maintains authoritative collections of books, plant images, manuscripts, portraits and data files, and provides publications and other modes of information service. The Institute meets the reference needs of botanists, biologists, historians, conservationists, librarians, bibliographers and the public at large, especially those concerned with any aspect of the North American flora.

Hunt Institute was dedicated in 1961 as the Rachel McMasters Miller Hunt Botanical Library, an international center for bibliographical research and service in the interests of botany and horticulture, as well as a center for the study of all aspects of the history of the plant sciences. By 1971 the Library's activities had so diversified that the name was changed to Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation. Growth in collections and research projects led to the establishment of four programmatic departments: Archives, Art, Bibliography and the Library.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
BUREAU OF PLANT INDUSTRY  
WASHINGTON

DIVISION OF  
COTTON AND OTHER FIBER CROPS  
AND DISEASES

October 4, 1940.

Mr. Wilson Popenoe,  
Research Department,  
La Lima, Honduras, C. A.

Dear Wilson:

I have your letter of September 26th regarding Pita Floja fiber and am enclosing herewith copy of a letter addressed to Mr. R. H. Hamer on this subject.

For a period of at least 25 years our office has received numerous letters regarding Pita Floja and also many different samples of this fiber. We have regarded Pita Floja as one of the promising "new" fibers. It appears, however, that it is yet to be determined if the cultivation of this plant for the commercial production of fiber will be practicable, and ordinarily the commercial production of fiber from wild plants is not a very satisfactory undertaking. Furthermore, it appears that the cleaning of the long spiny leaves of Pita Floja by mechanical methods will be quite difficult. As stated in my letter to Mr. Hamer, many different attempts have been made to solve this problem but we do not know that a satisfactory machine for doing this work has yet been perfected.

In connection with the possible development of a Pita Floja fiber industry, there has been legitimate expenditure of time, effort and money, and also considerable in the way of promotional work.

I sincerely hope that the commercial production of this fiber may be established, but so far as we have any information this work is still in the experimental field.

I hope that you will advise me if our office can furnish you any additional information on this subject, or can be of any further service to you in this matter.

With most cordial personal regards and hoping that you will be coming to Washington sometime in the near future, I am

Sincerely yours,

*H. T. Edwards*  
H. T. Edwards,  
Senior Technologist.

HTE:LW  
Enclosure

October 4, 1940.

Mr. R. H. Hamer,  
Magdalena Fruit Company,  
Santa Marta, Columbia.

Dear Mr. Hamer:

I am in receipt of a letter from Mr. Wilson Popence requesting that I address a letter to you regarding Pita or "Pita Floja". In concluding this letter, Mr. Popence says "We would like to know if you think Pita Floja has commercial possibilities at this time and if you think economical means of extracting the fiber are available.

I will answer the second question first. Although many attempts have been made to perfect machines or processes for cleaning Pita Floja fiber, and relatively large sums of money have been spent in connection with this work, we have no definite information indicating that either a machine or process which is entirely satisfactory for doing this work is now available. In view of the length and structure of the Pita Floja leaves, it seems unlikely that the machines now used for cleaning abacá, sisal and henequén, would be satisfactory for cleaning Pita Floja. It is not at all unlikely that machines which will clean an acceptable quality of Pita Floja fiber may be available, but the basic problem is a machine that will clean this fiber in commercial quantities at a cost that will make its production profitable. If such a machine is available, we have no information concerning it.

The matter of the "commercial possibilities" of any fiber, for which there is not at the present time an established market, involves quite a number of different problems. I will refer briefly to the following: Available supply of raw material, production costs, uses of fiber, and value of fiber.

We have been advised that there are very large areas of Pita Floja growing wild in Columbia, but that this plant has never been cultivated except in an experimental way. We do not know if the cultivation of this plant for the commercial production of fiber would be practicable, and the estimates we have received of the wild areas have been very variable. Ordinarily the areas of plants growing wild, and the probable production from such plants per given area, are overestimated.

The fact that there are large areas of wild Pita Floja is ordinarily considered to be a factor that will materially reduce the production costs of this fiber. This is questionable, as the increased cost of harvesting and transporting the leaves from plants growing wild and under jungle conditions may more than offset the costs of planting and cultivation. Furthermore, it is very difficult to maintain a regular supply of raw material (leaves) of uniform quality when this material is collected from wild plants.

The cost of cleaning and processing the fiber depends mainly, of course, on the degree of efficiency of the machinery used. As already stated, I do not know that a satisfactory machine for doing this work is now available. Without such a machine I do not believe that the production of Pita Floja fiber for export to this country would be practicable.

We have received during the past 25 years a large number of samples of Pita Floja fiber from Columbia. Some of this fiber is of very good quality and compares favorably with the medium grades of abacá fiber. Sample bales of this fiber that were sent to this country several years ago were poorly cleaned and not of quality that would be acceptable to our cordage manufacturers.

It should be noted that it is a matter of some difficulty to establish the commercial use of any "new" fiber either in the cordage or textile industries. Our spinning machinery is adapted to the fibers that are now regularly used, and a demand has been created for well recognized products made from these fibers. The consumer of Manila rope must be shown that Pita Floja rope is equally good, or better than Manila before he will buy it. The manufacturers are ordinarily reluctant to use new raw materials without quite definite assurance that these materials are at least equal in quality to what is now being used; are available at an equal, or lower, price; and, are available in relatively large quantities.

We understand that experimental work has been conducted with a view of preparing Pita Floja fiber in such form that it could be used for textile purposes in competition with flax and, perhaps, other textile fibers, but we do not know that this work has passed the experimental stage.

It would be our opinion that the probable use of this fiber in this country would be for cordage and twine purposes. For such uses, and if well cleaned and of uniform quality, it should command a price approximately equivalent to the current prices of the medium to high grades of abacá fiber, which are now about 6 to 7 cents per pound.

It has not been my purpose to paint an unfavorable picture of the commercial possibilities of Pita Floja fiber. On the contrary, we would be very glad to see the commercial production and use of this fiber established. It appears, however, that it is yet to be determined

If Pita Floja fiber of a quality that will be satisfactory to our manufacturers can be produced in Columbia or elsewhere at a cost that will make its production a profitable undertaking.

I shall be very glad to be of any possible further service to you in this matter.

Very truly yours,

H. T. Edwards,  
Senior Technologist.

HTE:LW

Copies furnished:

Mr. A. A. Pollan.  
Mr. F. N. Riley.  
Mr. Wilson Popenoe.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
BUREAU OF PLANT INDUSTRY  
WASHINGTON

DIVISION OF  
COTTON AND OTHER FIBER CROPS  
AND DISEASES

February 13, 1941.

Mr. Wilson Popenoe,  
Hotel Ambos Mundos,  
Habana, Cuba.

Dear Wilson:

Your letter of February 11th on the subject of ramie was received yesterday. I had already been advised by Doctor Bressman that you were doing some "expertin" in Cuba.

Our ramie specialist, Dr. B.B. Robinson, left here last night for Haiti, and will fly from Haiti to Cuba. He expects to arrive in Habana on the evening of February 25th, and hopes to stay at the Hotel Ambos Mundos. I have given him a note of introduction to you. Robinson can furnish you in detail all of the latest dope that we have on the ramie situation, and he hopes to obtain from you data regarding the ramie plantings in Cuba.

Inasmuch as you state that the growing of ramie in Cuba is "a cinch", the remaining problems appear to be those of processing and marketing, both of which are difficult.

As you no doubt know, China produces the bulk of the world supply of ramie. In China this fiber is stripped and cleaned by hand. There are two Japanese plantations in Davao, in the Philippines, which produce small quantities of ramie. One of these plantations has a large machine which they built themselves, and which they claim will clean about 30 piculs of ramie fiber per day. We do not know very much about this machine and, in any event, it probably could not be purchased. The other plantation in Davao continues to use the small machines which are not very satisfactory. Every little while some inventor comes forward with a new ramie machine or process. Some of these machines and processes seem to be fairly promising in the laboratory and in experimental work, but they do not seem to work out under conditions of commercial production. We do not know at this time of any entirely satisfactory ramie cleaning machine that is available.

The ramie market situation is somewhat foggy. We get reports from ramie promoters that there is an urgent demand in this country for millions of pounds of ramie, but a New York fiber merchant who recently had a small quantity of Philippine ramie for sale told us that he could find no market for it - or words to that effect. In ten out of the past eighteen years the

annual imports of ramie fiber into this country have been less than one ton. So far as we are informed, there is not at this time any well established demand for ramie fiber in the United States.

In reference to your third question, we have no data on the costs of growing ramie either in China or in the Philippine Islands. The costs in China would not have any very direct bearing on the situation in Cuba, and the Japanese planters in the Philippines are not disposed to distribute information in regard to their costs. I understand that the current price of ramie in New York is about 18 cents per pound. The normal price of this fiber in New York in recent years has ordinarily been from 8 to 11 cents per pound.

These are just suggestions - Robinson can fill in the details.

We of the Lunch Mess, and particularly myself, expect to include in our nightly devotions from now on the plea that the "possibility" of your coming here next month may develop into a reality.

Sincerely,

*H. T. Edwards.*