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The Kew Gardens of Sri Lanka

As London's Kew Gardens is set to star in a new TV show, Carolyn Fry explores a lost Sri Lankan link

THE  TIMES

The newspaper that speaks.




ON THE director's desk at Peradeniya Botanic Garden is a souvenir snow dome that, when shaken, sends a shower of plastic flakes over a model of the Palm House at Kew.

It's a reminder that the seeds for this prime Sri Lankan tourist attraction were sown far from tropical climes, in chilly west London. During colonial times the British Government sought potentially lucrative crops and experimented by procuring seeds abroad, growing them into seedlings at Kew Gardens, then dispatching them to offshoot enterprises in the colonies. The traffic-clogged Kew Road in Colombo marks the site of a 3ha (7 acre) garden set up by the British Government in

1810; a new garden was created at Peradeniya when botanists realised the warm, moist air of Ceylon's hill country offered better growing conditions.

Today, Peradeniya's layout betrays its colonial roots. Contained within a loop of the Mahaweli river are palm walkways, a lawned

circle ringed by endemic and exotic trees, spice and medicinal gardens, and a lake around which towering black bamboos creak eerily.

Botanist Gayani Fonseka takes me on a guided tour. There is the aptly named cannonball tree, which has brown spheres covering its trunk; the rum rum tree, whose green fruits are used to make musical instruments; and the kalukanda, one of three Sri Lankan natives now only found at Peradeniya. Around the Grand Circle are trees donated by dignitaries, including a Krishna fig planted by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 1954.

We wend our way from the Great Circle to a wide, open lawn and duck under a vast Java fig tree. Its branches sprawl across an area the size of seven tennis courts; sitting beneath it is like being enclosed in a one-tree forest. From here we cross an avenue of coco-de-mer palms where couples share picnics on shady benches, skirt the lake carved in the teardrop outline of Sri Lanka, and arrive at a pair of trees with pinkish bark.

Their nondescript appearance belies their importance. They are believed to be remnants of the first rubber trees grown outside South America, and came from seeds surreptitiously gathered in 1876 by Henry Alexander Wickham in Brazil, grown into seedlings at Kew and then dispatched in 40 wood and glass cases to Colombo.

A faded letter in the archives at Kew confirms the safe arrival of the precious *Hevea brasiliensis*. Headed "RB Garden Peradeniya, Ceylon", it reads: "My dear Hooker, You will be rejoiced to hear that the Heavea (sic) and castilloa plants have arrived in very fair order . . ." A plantation was later established at Henerathgoda Botanical Garden between Kandy and Colombo, where more of the original trees remain. In 1877, 22 seedlings were sent on to Kew's garden in Singapore where they gave rise to 8,000 plants. By the turn of the century, a million acres were cultivating rubber. The majority of natural rubber used today can be traced back to seedlings propagated at Kew and nurtured in Peradeniya.

Rubber was not the only plant transfer that helped to shape Sri Lanka's history. Kew also set up plantations of coffee and cinchona, a tree whose bark contained quinine used to treat malaria. At Hakgala Botanical Gardens, a winding five-hour drive from Kandy, you can see cinchona trees that came to Sri Lanka via Kew from Ecuador.

At an altitude of 2,000m, Hakgala has a cooler, more temperate, climate than Peradeniya. When I visit, low clouds sweep down from the adjacent peaks, wrapping the rose garden and cypress stands in swirls of mist. It's ideal weather for exploring the fernery that leads up to the cinchona plantation. Alone except for a following of monkeys eager to steal the mango in my pocket, I spend a happy hour climbing cobbled pathways and crossing gushing streams as the lush, unfurled fronds of tree ferns drip all around.

Kew's experiments with coffee resulted in 90,000 acres of jungle,

once the preserve of elephants, leopards and deer, being cleared for plantations. The success was short-lived as in 1869 a leaf blight wiped out the entire crop. Many planters followed the lead of enterprising Scotsman James Taylor and began growing tea instead. Today, the neat lines of bushes hugging the contours of Sri Lanka's hill country yield more than 300 million kilograms of tea a year.

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Visitors can get a feel for the life of a colonial tea planter and learn about modern-day production processes during a stay at Tea Trails. Created by Dilmah Tea, one of Sri Lanka's leading producers, Tea Trails comprises four beautifully renovated planter's bungalows located within working estates high on the sides of the Bogawantalawa Valley, the so-called Golden Valley of Tea.

Norwood Bungalow, where I stay, is secluded and intimate and takes only 15 guests. I arrive after dark and am given a Tanqueray and tonic to sip beside the fire in the drawing room before being led to a candlelit table on the terrace. My four-course dinner includes an indulgent mandarin tea-infused white and dark chocolate mousse. I enjoy the rare silence and watch stars appear and disappear beneath shifting clouds backlit by a full moon. Then it's off to my sumptuous four-poster to peruse Henry W. Cave's *Golden Tips*, a description of Ceylon and its great tea industry.

Carolyn Fry is the author of *The World of Kew*. The book accompanies *A New Year at Kew*, presented by Alan Titchmarsh on Fridays at 8pm on BBC Two.

Need to know

SriLankan Airlines (020-8538 2000, www.srilankan.aero) flies daily from Heathrow to Colombo from £450 plus taxes. Carolyn Fry travelled with Walkers Tours

(00 94 11 2342455, www.walkerstours.com). Prices for a stay at Tea Trails (www.teatrails.com) start at £90pp per night, based on two sharing. This includes full board, drinks, laundry and tea factory tour.

Sri Lanka Tourism: www.srilankatourism.org.uk.

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