



A CENTURY OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING FOR INNOVATION IN CEYLON TEA



In 2025, the Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka (TRISL) proudly celebrates its centenary, marking 100 years of innovative excellence in the tea industry of Sri Lanka (Ceylon). To mark this significant milestone, and in conjunction with International Tea Day on 21 May 2025, K.R.W.B. Kahandawa traces the history of TRISL and how its extension interventions have shaped the evolution of tea sector in Sri Lanka.

CONTEXT

As a pioneer in knowledge generation for Sri Lanka's tea sector, the Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka (TRISL) has achieved significant milestones that have not only shaped the trajectory of tea in Sri Lanka but also made a lasting impact on global tea research. Renowned as the guiding force behind Ceylon tea—the most sought-after tea in the global market—its influence extends far beyond national borders.



TRISL – A BRIEF HISTORY

The Tea Research Institute was established in 1925 following an ordinance passed by the Legislative Council of Ceylon. Mr. R.G. Coombe played a pivotal role in this initiative, leading the campaign within the Planters' Association of Ceylon. According to the ordinance, the Institute was created to conduct research and investigations related to tea, disseminate information, and provide educational facilities for students in tea research.



R.G. Coombe



The First Logo of TRI and the New Logo

The Institute's first publication, the Annual Report 1926 (Bulletin No. 1), and the inaugural volume of the Tea Quarterly in 1928, provided comprehensive information on tea cultivation and manufacture. The editor, Mr. T. Petch, described it as an effort to fill a critical gap in the agricultural literature of the British Empire. TRISL's scientific publications, advisory circulars, and extension materials have been well recognized by industry stakeholders throughout history.

Initially, TRISL's office was located in Kandy, with a laboratory at Linfield Bungalow in Nuwara Eliya. In December 1930, both were relocated to St. Coombs Estate in Talawakelle, which remains the Institute's main experimental station and head office.



In 1931, TRISL held its second conference at St. Coombs and launched the now-famous long-term fertilizer experiment on Field No. 03—considered the world’s first factorial experiment on a tree crop.

Establishment of Regional Stations

In 1935, TRISL established its first substation at Gonakelle Estate, Passara (Uva), where an entomologist worked on the Nettle grub, a then-prevalent pest. Later, during the 1960s, three more substations were set up in Kottawa (Galle), Kandy, and Ratnapura. During this period, TRISL introduced vegetative propagation, replacing seed propagation. These centres primarily distributed planting materials to stakeholders, especially smallholders who eventually became major producers in low and mid-elevation areas. Additional centres were established in Deniyaya (1983) and Mathugama (2012).

INITIATION OF EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

In its early years, TRISL researchers personally disseminated knowledge on tea crop management and processing. While continuing its advisory services for large estates, TRISL appointed a smallholdings officer in 1932. With the rapid growth of smallholdings, TRISL opened a dedicated office at Peradeniya in the 1950s. To meet rising demand, TRISL utilized various extension methods, including field demonstrations, mobile cinema vans, printed materials in local languages, and direct engagement with farmers and societies.

In 1955, Mr. R.L. Ilangakoon published the first Sinhala-language tea book, "Hand Book on Tea Planting." By 1957, smallholdings advisory services were handed over to the Tea Controller’s Department. Later, the Tea Small Holdings Development Authority (TSHDA) was established under Act No. 35 of 1975 to comprehensively address extension needs of the smallholder sector, with TRISL continuing support through TSHDA.



A field day organised by TRISL in the 1960's

Technology Transfer of TRISL

TRISL employs diverse communication modes to transfer technology to stakeholders. Its main clients include corporate and medium-scale growers (estates over 10 acres), while TSHDA handles

smallholdings under 10 acres. TRISL supports TSHDA through Training of Trainers (TOT) programmes to update field officers on emerging technologies.

Advisory Visits

Plantation managers request visits for field inspections and tailored recommendations, on cultivation and processing, documented in visit reports maintained by both TRISL and the estates. These records, now being digitized, serve as historical references for problem diagnosis, especially in corporate estates.

Training Programmes and Field Days

TRISL provides training programmes on tea cultivation and processing for personnel in the corporate and medium-scale sectors. Conducted at either the Institute or estate premises, these programmes include demonstrations on good practices and aim to enhance knowledge and skills across all staff levels. TRISL officers also serve as resource persons for smallholder training organized by TSHDA.

Forums and Seminars

Since inception, the Experiments and Extension (E&E) Forum has served as a platform for sharing research findings and receiving planter feedback. A separate E&E Forum was later introduced for the smallholding sector, involving TSHDA officials and tea smallholder representatives. The outcomes influence technical recommendations and policy decisions on subsidies and input provision for smallholdings specially.



Regional Scientific Committee Seminar with District Planters Association

TRISL also organizes Regional Scientific Committee (RSC) Seminars in collaboration with District Planters' Associations, facilitating regional knowledge sharing and live feedback from planters. Regional Technical and Extension Forum (RTEF) is also a similar programme conducted for smallholder sector at regional level.

TRANSFER OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Advisory and Extension Service of TRISL conducts research on tea sector extension to enhance its efficiency and impact. Recognizing inefficiencies in transferring knowledge to lower-level plantation employees, TRISL introduced a Pluralistic Technology Transfer Strategy in the early 2000s.



Para Extension Training Programme

Para-Extension Aid Approach

This successful approach fostered estate collaboration, focused on problem-specific and job-specific training, and established agro-technology centres on estates. Regular monitoring and evaluation ensured sustainability and effectiveness.



Crop Clinics for Smallholder farmers with Mobile Laboratory

Crop Clinics and Extension Campaigns

Since 2005, TRISL has organized Crop Clinics and Extension Campaigns with support from TSHDA and private partners. These clinics use TRISL's Mobile Laboratory and engage expert officers to deliver tailored solutions.

Extension campaigns address themes such as leaf quality, soil conservation, and organic inputs, raising awareness among all tea sector stakeholders and the public.



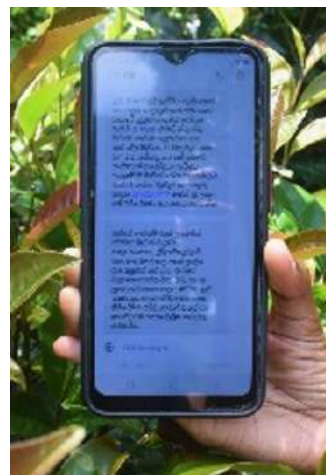
A ToT Session for TSHDA Officials

Cyber Extension Projects

Modern ICT initiatives ensure cost-effective, efficient dissemination of TRISL's recommendations. [The SMS Gateway, launched in 2018](#), delivers two technical messages per month in Sinhala to over 1,000 stakeholders, including TSHDA officers and smallholders.

In 2021, the TRISL Call Centre began offering real-time technical support. This database-driven service helps prioritize future research and extension needs and is growing in popularity among tea growers.

The Tea Advisor Android app, launched in June 2023, delivers seasonal updates, technical recommendations, and access to TRISL services. With over 2,500 installations and steady audience growth, it is a key tool for modern stakeholders.



TRI SMS Gateway & Tea Advisor Android App

Voice Message Service

TRISL also partnered with Dialog Axiata PLC in 2021 to launch the Dialog Govimithuru Tea Voice Message Channel, offering daily voice messages to over 33,000 subscribers. Content is updated regularly with TRISL's technical input.

TRISL's, [Website](#), [Facebook page](#) and [YouTube channel](#) are vibrant advisory platforms. The Facebook page shares institutional updates and recommendations, while the YouTube channel hosts videos on best practices, appealing to a new generation of tea growers. Sri Lanka Journal of Tea Science (earlier Tea Quarterly) is now available online with a higher accessibility.



TRISL Field Demonstration for a medium scale estate

END NOTE

As the Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka marks its centenary in 2025, it stands as a beacon of innovation, resilience, and dedicated service to the tea industry. Over the past 100 years, TRISL has pioneered scientific advancements in tea cultivation and processing while evolving its advisory services to meet changing sector needs.



From traditional bulletins and field visits to modern digital outreach, TRISL has ensured effective knowledge transfer to diverse stakeholders.

These efforts have empowered both large estates and smallholders, drawing in new generations through digital platforms. Looking forward, TRISL's unwavering commitment to research excellence and inclusive knowledge sharing promises a sustainable and innovative future for Ceylon tea on the global stage.

TRI Centenary Logo

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