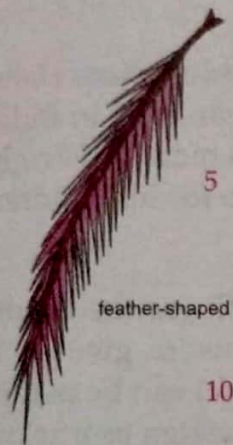


B. THE COCONUT PALM



feather-shaped



fan-shaped

5 A palm tree has a straight, slender trunk with no branches and a cluster of leaves at the top. There are over 2,500 different species of the palm which vary very much in height, from a few inches to over 98 feet. The trunks of palms do not have the rings by which one can tell the age of trees when they are cut down. The shiny, leathery leaves are either fan-shaped or feather-shaped, and the largest are nearly 39 feet long.

15 There are palms in Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, and North and South America. Some grow in dry deserts and some in rich, damp earth. Palms bear various fruits, the best known being probably the coconut and the date. The date palm can live on less water than any other fruit-growing plant, and so in many desert regions of the world dates have been the chief food from the earliest times. India is surrounded by the sea on its three sides, so here the coconut palm (which usually grows near the seashore) is more popular than the date palm. The coconut palm is the most beautiful of the palm trees.



coconut palm

date palm

Class-notes :

35 The coconut is the biggest of all the nuts. It is one of the most important crops in tropical countries all round the world. It grows on a tall palm which has a swollen base. The slender, leaning, ringed trunk of the tree rises to a height of about 25 metres. At its top the tree has a crown of large feather-like leaves.

40 Flowering begins in the five year old trees. Fruits take a year to ripen. The annual yield per tree may reach 100. Yields continue to be profitable until trees are about 50 years old. The flowers are white and the nuts (when they form) are in big bunches of 12 to 20.

45 The coconut is perhaps the most useful crop in the world. Indonesians claim that coconuts have as many uses as there are days in a year. And in India we have a saying that the man who plants a coconut, plants meat and drink, hearth and home, vessels and clothing for himself and also for his children after him.

50 The solid white part of the nut is used as food. The milk (or the liquid inside the shell) gives us an appetising drink. The flowers give us a sweet juice from which sugar or toddy (an alcoholic drink) can be made. Palm cabbage (young bud cut from the top of the tree) is eaten as a salad vegetable.

55 The dried kernel of the coconut (known as *copra*) can be pressed to obtain valuable coconut oil. This has been used in cooking for thousands of years, and now helps to make not only margarine but also soap, candles, cosmetics, detergents, and many other products. About 1000 nuts usually provide about 230 kilograms of copra, which should yield about 110 litres of coconut oil.

When the oil has been pressed from the copra, the part that is left is fed to cattle as coconut cake. Dried and shredded coconut meat is also used by bakers and confectioners for cakes and sweets.

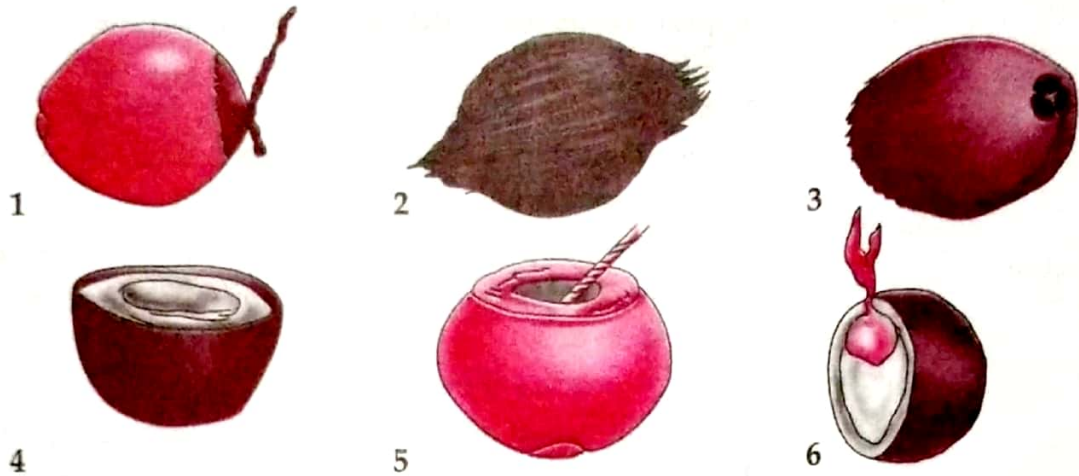
60 The fibre surrounding the nut can be used to make ropes, brushes and brooms. It also provides an excellent stuffing for cushions. Palm leaves are often used in thatching. The ribs of the long leaves are so strong that they can be used as rafters. The fibres of the leaves are made into hats, baskets and mats. The leaf-stalks are used as posts for fencing. The timber of the tree is good for making furniture. In olden days, the flat plates of the palm leaves were used as writing material.

Class-notes :

Cl

Now let us have a close look at this wonderful fruit.

70 The coconut has many parts: (1) an outer skin, (2) a fibrous covering, (3) a hard woody shell, (4) the kernel, (5) the liquid or milk and (6) the seed from which a new coconut can grow.



75 If we look at the narrow end of a coconut, we notice three little brown pits on the surface. Two of these are blocked by quite hard material. But the third one has a very thin covering which can be easily bored through with a pocket-knife. Boys often do this to let out the milk before cracking the shell.

80 Inside (opposite to this soft hole) there is a small knob buried in the kernel. This knob is the seed from which a new coconut can grow. As the seed cannot get water from outside, the nut has to provide a good supply from inside. That is the real reason for the existence of the milk inside the coconut. The nutty part also provides food for the young plant.

The coconut has a single seed, and provides the best protection and the richest food for its growth. Shouldn't human beings also follow the example of the coconut?

Class-notes :