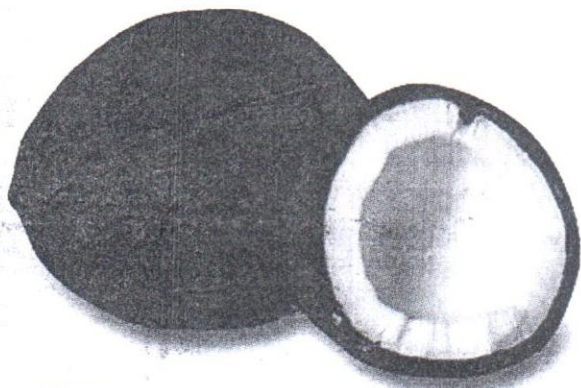


# Coconut: The tree of many uses



## GOOD LIVING

BY SOLOMON KARANJA

**T**he coconut plant towers above other fruit trees. And so does its nutritional value. The coconut has a variety of uses at the coast and one wonders how people in this region would survive without the tree. The coconut tree supplies a nutritious drink, while its ripened nuts provide food and oil.

Coconut shells serve as cups and firewood and an alcoholic syrup, known locally as *mnazi*, and sugar are made from the sap of the unopened flower cluster.

The leaves are used for thatching and weaving baskets and serve as building materials as well.

Immature nuts contain copious amounts of coconut milk and the dried meat of the coconut is a principal export product.

Coconut oil is the most important vegetable oil. It has also been discovered that shredded coconut husks can be compacted and used as artificial soil for greenhouse potted plants, especially in this era of hydroponics and drip irrigation.

In 1840, a ship transporting coconuts sank in the Caribbean several hundreds miles off the coast of Florida in the United States. The coconuts floated on the currents until they reached the beaches of that state. There they sprouted, producing beautiful forests of coconut palms that remain to this day. The inhabitants of Polynesia have survived for generations, thanks to the coconuts.

The water in the green coconut, at six months, is of low nutritional value but as the plant matures, the pulp becomes firmer with less water and nutrients are more concentrated at 6.3 per cent carbohydrates and 3 per cent proteins.

The coconut contains magnesium, calcium and phosphorus. Fat, at 30 per cent of mature weight, is the most abundant nutrient.

The oil is composed of short and medium chain saturated fatty acids, which are easily absorbed and do not promote cholesterol production in the body.

The magnesium in the coconut surpasses that contained in milk, meat and eggs, and is useful in building healthy bones and cartilage in the body.

Calcium and phosphorus are useful components of body muscles and bones. The coconut is therefore useful in bone decalcification and keeps away degenerative diseases of the joints and cartilages.

Any loss of bone mass, especially due to age and diet, can be halted by taking coconut milk preferably with legumes and oranges. It is

important to remember that Vitamin D is vital in the development of healthy bones and a few hours of sunshine is useful in treatment of osteoarthritis.

Coconut water has also been found to be useful in infant teething as it promotes the formation of enamel. In cases of brittle hair and nails copious amounts of coconut water is useful. One litre of coconut water contains 300 mg of magnesium, which is the recommended dietary allowance for an adult.

The primary objective of maintaining a healthy musculoskeletal system is to maintain muscle strength and tone, prevent uric acid in joints; reduce arthritis and joint inflammation; prevent bone loss by providing calcium, phosphorus and magnesium and reduce their loss through the urine.

Excess proteins and salt consumption has been shown to lead to loss of calcium through urine.

A study done in 1992 showed that women who consume a great deal of meat are at a greater risk of hip or forearm fracture. It is interesting that it is among the wealthy that meat is most eaten and many cases of bone fractures recorded due to osteoporosis.

A diet based on meat, fish, and shellfish acidifies the blood. The body tries to compensate for this excess acidity by releasing alkalising minerals such as calcium from the bones. This way, bones are deprived of calcium, thus increasing incidences of weak bones. Fruits and vegetables are alkalisers. Even though they contain little calcium, they halt the urinary loss of this mineral from the bones.

Soft drinks contain phosphoric acid and sugar, substances that lead to the loss of calcium.

Aged cheese contains a lot of calcium, but it is not recommended in case of bone weakness because it also contains huge amounts of proteins and salt.

Molasses is very rich in calcium and other bone-building minerals as well as cartilage-building sulphur. This makes it the only sweetener that should be used by those suffering from osteoarthritis.

Regular consumption of coconut and a little sunbathing can help in strengthening the bones and muscles.

We should restore the coconut plantations along our coastlines both for aesthetic and dietary reasons. And those living and working along the coastline can relax under the coconut trees in the knowledge that they have nothing to worry about as their health and wealth is taken care of by this mighty tree.