Puerto Rico's Tropical Agriculture Research Station
100 Years of Tropical Research

Story by Ricardo Guerra y Sidell
Text by Larry Shore
Photo courtesy of the Agricultural Research Service

The Tropical Agriculture Research Station, operated by the USDA's Agricultural Research Service, had its beginning in 1901, when Congress appropriated $5,000 and directed the Secretary of Agriculture to establish an experiment station in Puerto Rico to study agricultural problems of interest to the island. The Governor of Puerto Rico, cooperating with the island's communities and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, selected the present site of the station at Mayaguez; the farm known as Hacienda Carmen, 235 acres donated by the City of Mayaguez.

As its inception, this facility was known as the Federal Experiment Station. In 1957, it became the Mayaguez Institute of Tropical Agriculture (MITA), and in 1982, was renamed the Tropical Agriculture Research Station (TARS). Since 1961, it has been part of the Agricultural Research Service's Tropical Crops and Germplasm Research Division.

When established, the Federal Experiment Station was the island's only institution for agricultural research, and horticultural research has always been prominent in the station's program. In the past, both tropical- and temperate-zone vegetables, as well as fruit and ornamental cultivars, were introduced from all parts of the world for evaluation in Puerto Rico. The station still maintains an extensive collection of germplasm consisting of about 275 genera and 450 species; this is one of the largest collections of tropical trees available in the Western world. The station's grounds are often visited by botanists, horticulturists and taxonomists from around the globe.

Common on these grounds are exotic plants such as cinnamon, nutmeg, rubber, vanilla, black gram, pimento, etc. (see page 10)

1. Two main goals of the TARS National Germplasm Repository project are maintenance and monitoring of varietal and diverse tree banana and plantain in cassava. 2. An instrument for measuring photosynthesis in tropical fruit crops is used to test plants in research. 3. Plant Physiologist and TARS Research Leader Ricardo Guerra y Sidell examines a new variety of mango tree. 4. In 1901, the U.S. Congress authorized the establishment and maintenance of an agricultural experiment station in Puerto Rico. This was the Tropical Agriculture Research Station. Known earlier as the Federal Experiment Station, it was established in 1957. 5. New crops from an early breeding station. 6. Mangoes, often called the "Queen of Fruits," research to improve disease resistance. The effectiveness of varying stock and rootstock combinations is tested. 7. A collection of Citrus. Six hundred citrus trees are being evaluated under minimum irrigation and intercropped with bananas. 8. The TARS germplasm collection boasts 26 plantain and 34 banana accessions. 9. Rambutan fruit, one with exposed pulp. The rambutan clones under evaluation are intercropped with bananas. 10. In the TARS germplasm collection, 324 traits and 450 avocado accessions. 11. Avocados for commercial use are being evaluated under various soils and with generous irrigation. 12. Niu, a banana from Hawaii and Yucatan, Mexico, may be a young rambutan tree. Clones under evaluation are intercropped with bananas. 13. Cacao tree in the germplasm collection. 14. Tuberocose, one with minimum irrigation and intercropped with bananas. 15. Aucocados in the germplasm collection. 16. Young papaya trees under study. 17. Young jackfruit trees under study.