

Peanut CRSP Team Offering Helping Hand in

GUYANA

Story & photos by
BRAD HAIRE

The hot, midmorning sun seeps through the trees, casting speckled shadows on the river's muddy shore. Abraham Griffith stands waist-deep in the murky water and steadies his homemade wooden canoe. He wants the peanut experts from America to step dryly from the shore onto it. After paddling together to the other side, they disembark and continue the hike to his field.



"Yes, I learned today, I would like more information to share. We know if we continue to grow peanuts, the peanut people will smile."

— ABRAHAM GRIFFITH



A few hundred yards later, the group emerges into the field, a clearing made by cutting and burning the jungle. Griffith smiles, listens and asks questions as the experts critique his peanuts and make recommendations on how he and his people can efficiently grow more in an environmentally friendly way in the future.

“Yes, I learned today,” said Griffith, the touchau, or captain, of Parikwarunawa, an Amerindian village in Guyana. “I would like more information to share. We know if we continue to grow peanuts, the peanut people will smile.”

Griffith is just one of the hundreds of peanut farmers in the Rupununi region of this tiny, poor, South American country who have been helped by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Guyana Peanut Collaborative Research Support Program.

The Guyana Peanut CRSP pools the intellectual resources of agricultural experts from the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and the University of Florida in an effort to bring more modern, sustainable farming practices and agribusiness to the region. Guyana’s Beacon Foundation is the local coordinating institute.

The project’s purposes are to “introduce best management practices and tools in an effort to increase production and add value for the growers while preserving the natural beauty in the region,” said Bob Kemerait, a CAES plant pathologist and the project co-leader.

Guyana’s Rupununi Savannah is 22,000 square miles of vast, grass landscape, where sunrises demand stillness and attention. Only about 20,000 people, mostly the indigenous Amerindians, live in the remote region. They are, Kemerait said, “some of the poorest people in a poor country.”





A typical slash-and-burn peanut field in the Rupununi.



An Amerindian hut in Moca Moca.

The region is accessible only by air or by "The Road," which starts on the coast in Georgetown, Guyana's capital, snakes south through the northern rain forest and ends in Lethem on the Brazil border. It's a dusty, dirt highway littered with tire-bursting holes at its best and a flooded logging trail at its worst.

Space is one of few things the Amerindians have plenty of, and they like it. If an Amerindian wants to say hello to a neighbor, he may have to walk an hour to do it. A village can have 50 to 200 families and be spread over several miles with a centralized community building and usually a school.

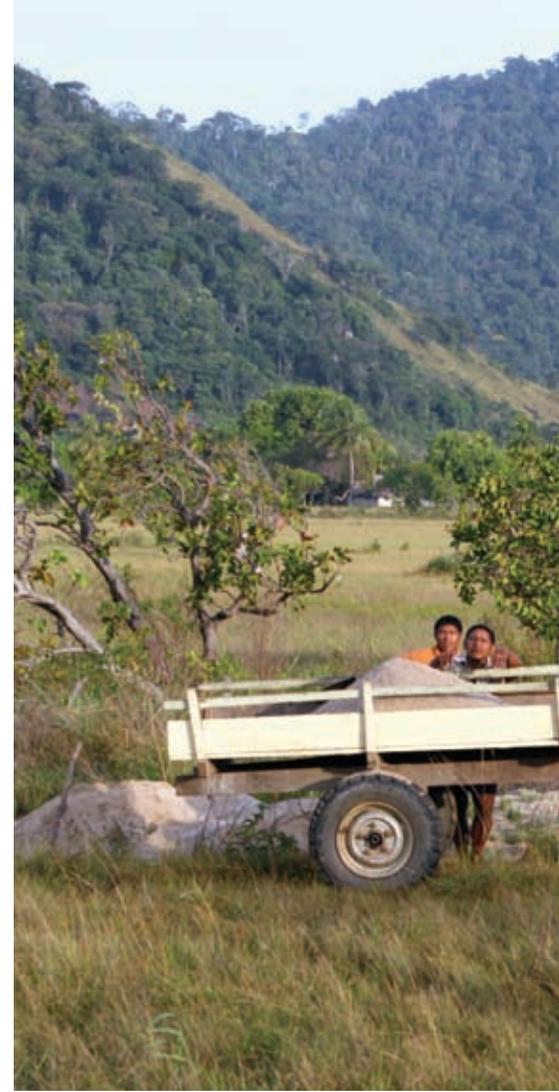
Obesity is not an issue. Most scratch out a subsistence living by farming, hunting and fishing. The toxic, tuberous vegetable called cassava in Guyana is the staple food. It's processed into flour. The juice can be turned into parakari, an

alcoholic brew of varying strength.

The average Rupununi farmer speaks the tongue of his tribe and maybe another and English, which rings Caribbean in American ears. He is reserved but gracious and lives in a thatched wooden or homemade brick hut with a spouse and three to five children. He and his family work 2 to 3 acres of land by hand. He shies away from using the less-fertile savannah and opts for the thick jungles at the base of the surrounding hills. He slashes and burns a clearing for his crops, knowing that tree ash is a great fertilizer.

The Guyana CRSP team wants to change some of those farming practices.

Taking almost two dozen trips to the region over the past five years, the core Guyana CRSP team from Georgia and Florida is Kemerait, UGA Cooperative Extension entomologist Steve Brown, engineer Jay Williams, agronomist Glen



Harris, CAES plant pathology department head John Sherwood and UF agronomist Greg MacDonald.

Administered by Jonathan "Tim" Williams on the UGA Griffin campus, Peanut CRSP conducts projects in other countries, too.

Providing the farmers technical,



Peanut digging and picking, Rupununi style.



Randy Gilbert



Vincent Henry

physical and mechanical help, the Guyana team has prepared and monitored on-site research trials, conducted dozens of workshops and trainings and developed and distributed a slick peanut-production guide that details the best ways to plant seed, fertilize soils and control insects, diseases and weeds

in the Rupununi. They've also taught better ways to handle peanuts and store them longer.

Randy Gilbert is a Rupununi peanut farmer and the project extension agent on the ground. Routinely traveling many miles between villages on his motorcycle, he says it's working.

Farmers who have been able to implement recommendations have increased yields, he said. Before, average peanut yields were about 1,200 pounds per acre. Now, some farmers are getting as high as 2,800 pounds per acre and are moving away from the slash-and-burn method that destroys the forest. Acreage fluctuates between 500 and 1,000 acres.

"What the farmers desire the most is to be guided to the best practices and the best means," Gilbert said. "They just need to be pointed in the right direction. And with the initiative, the farmers take it and run and basically do what has to be done."

The Guyana peanut CRSP is the fruit of a seed planted in the late 1990s when an El Niño climate event devastated Guyana and left many starving and impoverished, said Vincent Henry, the former regional chairman. The Amerindian elders gathered to discuss ways they could ensure food safety and nutrition, develop human resources and social services and create jobs and a cash economy in the Rupununi. They wanted to build on something they already knew.

"At the top of the lists were peanuts," Henry said.

The peanut, a South American native, has been grown in the Rupununi for at least the past 50 years. Some say longer. The growing season lasts from April to September, just as in the United States.



Sharon Gilbert rakes peanuts to dry in the sun.



Ladies at the Aranaputa cottage industry sift and roast peanuts.



It's the one thing farmers can sell for cash, mostly to truckers who brave the road north to the markets in Georgetown. They use the money to buy small items like clothing, school supplies or bicycles.

Jerry La Gra has worked in agricultural development for four decades. He has lived in Guyana for more than 15 years and headed the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture there. Retired, the American expatriate is the project coordinator in Guyana and the man to know to get stuff done there.

"Guyana is like any developing country," La Gra said. "Getting the right people involved in transferring the right knowledge and technology is a challenge."

"A lot of agricultural projects like this fail because they don't consider the whole chain, think about the whole system."

The system was shocked in 2004. Eager farmers, sparked by the CRSP project, fair prices and nice weather, produced more than 1.4 million pounds, a Rupununi record and three times the average before the project started.

Combined with legal and illegal peanut imports and a slowing Guyanese economy, a glut formed in the



The Rupununi peanut-production guide developed by the Guyana CRSP team.



Jerry La Gra



Bob Kemerait, a CAES plant pathologist, answers farmers' questions at a workshop in Aranaputa.

Georgetown market. Prices spiraled to 30 and 40 Guyanese dollars a pound, or 15 to 20 U.S. cents per pound.

Rupununi farmers weren't happy. They need about 50 Guyanese dollars per pound just to break even. For the system to work, something had to be done to increase local consumption and decrease the dependency on Georgetown.

And having a little snack now could save the system in the future, La Gra said.

In a screened-in shed in Parishara, Gwendolyn Mellvin sifts cassava flour as Florie Albert flips the flatbread over an open fire. The smoke burns their eyes. In the small, adjoining building, two more ladies cut the cassava bread into 3-inch squares and smear the peanut butter they made from peanuts bought from local farmers onto the pieces. They make a fruit punch, too.

Mellvin and her partners deliver their



Rupununi peanut farmers look over a peanut field in Aranaputa.



Greg MacDonald, a University of Florida agronomist, helps an Amerindian farmer identify a weed.

peanut-butter-and-cassava-bread snacks each day to the local school. The Guyana Ministry of Education gives them 60 Guyanese dollars per snack to do it. (60 Guyanese dollars equals about 30 U.S. cents.) "I like the work," she said. "It's a good job."

The group is part of a pilot project La Gra hopes will create jobs and a local niche market for peanut farmers while providing children a nutritious boost.

Virgil Harding, a school headmaster in the Rupununi for 10 years, says the elementary and primary school students often come to school with nothing to eat. They look forward to the snacks, which



James George, the Moca Moca touchau, with his daughter Nainni.

has helped attendance.

"And it's much more nutritious for them," Harding said.

The Peanut CRSP, Canadian International Development Agency and Beacon Foundation have helped provide peanut shellers, roasters and grinders and record-keeping training to six other villages to set up similar cottage industries since the spring of 2005.

The cottage industries collectively serve about 1,400 students daily and buy about 30,000 pounds of peanuts, 112,000 pounds of cassava and 25,000 pounds of fruit annually, about 4 million Guyanese dollars' worth, La Gra said. A cottage industry on average makes an annual net profit of about 600,000 Guyanese dollars, or about 3,000 U.S. dollars.

It's too early to know how sustainable the Guyana Peanut CRSP and cottage industry projects will be in the long run, La Gra said. But the two projects together are on the right track. It will ultimately be up to the Amerindians.

The experts on the Guyana CRSP team feel it's worth a shot. They donate their time and knowledge and often must lean heavily on their understanding families and helpful colleagues when traveling to Guyana.

The team members feel they're the sturdy, gentle hands of a developed,



A school girl enjoys a peanut-butter-and-cassava-bread snack in Aranaputa.

well-educated country blessed with opportunity that are reaching into the warm, strong embrace of people who want to improve their lives and see their children have more while staying connected to one of God's great, beautiful sanctuaries: the Rupununi savannah.

"I would like for the project to continue," said James George, the touchau of Moca Moca, with his baby girl Nainni riding on his back. "The people are already getting information useful and learning all the time. To be honest, to be truth, our country is a third-world country, and yours is a superpower. And what you know I don't know. But things can be learned both ways." ❧



Cassava processing in Moca Moca.



Gwendolyn Mellvin sifts cassava flour as Florie Albert flips the cassava bread at the cottage industry in Parishara.

