

Abstract

The chapter presents a detailed account of efforts at tea improvement in Kenya with achievements made and challenges to be surmounted since tea was first introduced into the country. Although tea was introduced into Kenya at the turn of the 20th century, concerted efforts at tea improvement could not take root until the early 1960s after the country gained self-rule from Britain. Owing to the heterogeneity of pioneer seedling populations that was accompanied by management constraints, early research efforts resulted in the development of whole single cuttings as propagation materials which, coupled with clonal selection, led to the release and commercialization of high yielding and quality clones. This resulted in rapid expansion of the Kenyan tea industry. To date, the Tea Research Foundation has released a total of 50 high yielding and good quality tea clones for commercial utilization, not just in Kenya alone but also in the entire East African region. The Kenyan tea industry, which almost solely involves the export of black CTC tea, is currently experiencing problems as a result of global annual over-production that is outstripping demand. To counter the declining revenue base of tea enterprises, attempts to undertake tea product diversification and value adding have been initiated. Furthermore, tea improvement activities integrating molecular markers and participatory clonal selection involving farmers and consumers are expected to fast-track the development and adoption of novel varieties within a relatively short period.