

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The family Piperaceae, is a family of herbs and shrubs, widely distributed throughout the tropics. It has afforded few plants of economic importance to the world, but those which it has are of great value, both medicinally and as spices, of which the following are examples : Piper betle L. (betle pepper), P. clusii C.DC. (African pepper), P. cubeba L. (cubeb), P. longum L. and P. officinarum C.DC. (long pepper) and P. methysticum Forst. (Kava). These species however, are of minor importance when compared with P. nigrum L. (black pepper).

For more than a thousand years black pepper has been a source of trade between the Far East, which is the main region of its cultivation, and Europe. The value of pepper was recognised by the Romans. The wealth of the once great trading cities of Venice and Genoa depended to a great extent on the importation of pepper during the Middle Ages. It was the demand for pepper and its costliness that led the Portuguese to search for a sea passage to India, and later the value of this commodity, together with that of other spices, was the cause of war between the great maritime nations of Western Europe for territorial rights over the Spice Islands of the Far East, as they had fought for the islands of the New World.

In the New World, however, the family has no species of economic importance. P. nigrum and P. betle have been introduced into Trinidad, but they are not grown on a commercial scale. Of the indigenous species belonging to the family in Trinidad, of which there are thirty-five (Yuncker (1953)), little is known.

The object of this investigation was to gain some knowledge of the family as it occurs in Trinidad, particularly with regard to fungal pathogens. From the search for diseased material for this work, a study of the distribution of the family in northern Trinidad developed.