

Shade Grown Coffee: A Traditional Way to Manage Coffee Farms

Mexico is one of the largest coffee producers in the world. Coffee is grown in the central and southern states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. These regions are primarily tropical forest. Tropical rainforests have some of the most diverse plant communities in the world.

Modern coffee farming has often involved growing only coffee in monoculture farms. Because there is no forest canopy, coffee is grown directly in the sun. Sun-grown monoculture coffee is a modern way of farming. Indigenous and traditional ways of growing coffee, however, integrate coffee plants into the forest.



Tropical wet rainforest in southern Mexico



Monoculture coffee farm

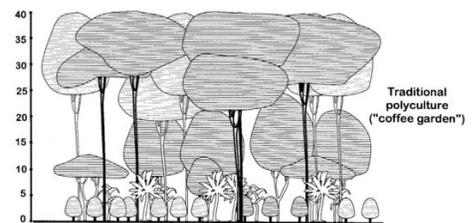


Sun-grown monoculture (left) and traditional coffee grown in the forest (right)

Shade grown coffee is an indigenous forest-like land management system. It involves growing coffee along with many other kinds of plants. It is particularly important that there are plants of different heights, which create layers like the forest.



A traditional shaded coffee farm has plants growing at different heights that create multiple layers of forest. The tallest trees create shade and can include fruit trees or other trees, like cedar or rubber. Tall trees provide protection from high winds and cold temperatures. Medium-level trees, like coffee trees, grow below. Smaller food plants and vines grow at the bottom. These plants can include chiles, squash, and chives.



Traditional shaded coffee farms can have over 100 different kinds of plants growing in them. Many of these other plants are useful for food, medicine, or timber and can provide additional income for the farmers.



Traditional shaded coffee farms can also attract many different kinds of animals. In one study, researchers reported between 136-138 different kinds of birds in the traditional coffee farm. Another study reported only 6-12 different kinds of birds in the sun-grown monoculture coffee farm. Traditional coffee farms can also provide habitat for other populations, like rodents, deer, and other predators.



While shade grown coffee may not always produce as much coffee as monoculture coffee farms, they produce many other kinds of food, timber, and medicine that farmers can either use or sell.

