

An Industry Born Out of a Seed: A Short History of the Pistachio



Damghan Pistachio
innovation center



Damghan University

According to the Royal Botanic Gardens of Pew and Plants of the World encyclopedia, Pistachio belongs to the cashew family originating mainly from the plateau of Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Moreover, various sources including French writers and encyclopedias like Britannica and Americana, have different opinions on the birthplace of pistachios, suggesting regions such as Iran, Arabia, Syria, and more.

Pistachios, classified as tropical fruit, were termed "anacardiaceae" by Linnaeus from Spain in 1737. Unlike almonds and walnuts, the pistachio tree is dicotyledonous, with separate male and female trees. The pistachio tree bears a bountiful harvest one year and a less abundant one the following year. The etymology of pistachios dates back 4,000 years in Iran. The word "pistachio" has traversed languages like Greek, Latin, European, Arabic, Turkish, Russian, Japanese, and more from its Persian roots. When pistachios first found their way to Iran, they were known as "Pistaco" in Persian, later evolving into "pistachio." The Latin term "pistachio" is derived from this word. Since then, pistachio orchards have flourished across Iran. The Persian term "pistachio" has been traced to the inhabitants of northern regions in Kerman. The word "pistachio" itself is a deeply ancient Iranian word, stemming from the local dialect spoken in the pistachio-rich territories of Kerman province.





Iran's oldest pistachio tree in Rafsanjan, at 15 meters high with a diameter of 3.5 meters

Wild pistachio forests in the northeastern regions of Iran and areas bordering Turkmenistan and Afghanistan have ancient origins. The pistachio tree is believed to have become domesticated in Iran around 4,000 to 3,000 years ago, with Sabzevar and Sarakhs considered among the oldest cultivated areas. The history of pistachio cultivation in Damghan, Semnan, and Qazvin is attributed to the 7th century AH (13th century CE), while it dates back to the 12th century AH (18th century CE) in Kerman province. Despite Iran's long history of pistachio cultivation, pistachio farming has experienced significant growth in recent decades.

The Iranians were the first to transplant this type of nut from its natural habitat, the pistachio forests scattered in the northeastern mountains of Iran, to the plains. Gradually, they spread it to other regions of the Iranian plateau. During this



expansion, qualitative development has also occurred. They aimed for larger, plump pistachios with desirable characteristics like the greenness of the kernel and the whiteness of the shell, making them more productive.

The roots of pistachio cultivation in Iran stretch back to the Achaemenid era, approximately 4,000 to 5,000 years ago. It is believed that the natural pistachio forests and trees in Iran were tamed and cultivated some 3 to 4 thousand years ago. From there, they spread beyond Iran's borders, especially to regions around the Mediterranean Sea.

The initial emergence of pistachios can be traced to the Achaemenid period and the Kerman regions. Following the rise of Islam, Qom gained prominence as a pivotal area for pistachio growth in Iran. Its historical origins date back to the early centuries AH, while the earliest writings about pistachios in Damghan, Semnan, and Qazvin are attributed to the seventh century, and pistachio cultivation in Kerman began in the twelfth century. Presently, Iranian pistachios are named after the regions where they have historical roots, were transported from, and are produced, such as Damghani, Qazvini, Ravari, Sabzevari, and Qomi pistachios. Additionally, it's worth noting that pistachios are categorized by their shapes. Varieties like Mumtaz (smiling), Baluchi, Koleghoochi, white pistachio, green pistachio, and dagger have distinct ripening times, falling into early and late categories, maturing from late August to early October.

As pistachio cultivation expanded to different regions and lands, various varieties were chosen based on the climatic differences of each area and the preferences of the orchard owners in selecting pistachio cultivars. Over time, a series of pistachio varieties were selected in each region, tailored to that region's characteristics and the preferences of its people. In Damghan, for example, they selected large pistachios



with tender, delicious kernels, and a green color, influenced by the region's dry and warm climate.

The introduction of pistachio to the United States goes back to 1854 through Middle Eastern immigrants. However, the acreages were limited to small patches of land in California, and serious attempts at cultivating pistachio in America didn't start until 1920, at which point an American botanist called William E. Whitehouse traveled to Iran for a year. He brought back certain cultivars from Iran, among which was the female "Kerman" cultivar. Kerman became the subject of multiple experiments over decades until it became a staple of the American pistachio industry in the late 1980s.



William E. Whitehouse, the USDA researcher who experimented for decades on the "Kerman" pistachio female cultivar



The ancient pistachio trees found in the Damghan region, some of which have been grafted and cultivated, indicate that grafting techniques were introduced by the people of Damghan and incorporated into pistachio cultivation methods. Old pistachio trees in other ancient regions either haven't been grafted or don't show the grafting effect on their old trunks. This technique contributed to asexual propagation and the development of uniform and high-quality varieties.

Due to its favorable geographical location, Damghan benefits from being located in the three major provinces of Iran, including Tehran, Mashhad, and Isfahan. Major varieties of pistachio produced in Damghan are Fakhri, Abasali, Khanjari, and Shahpasand, and are known for producing early-harvest pistachios. Furthermore, its proximity to consumption markets, primarily Tehran, provides opportunities for direct sales for Damghan's orchard owners.

