

Pistachio in Iran: A Brief Historical Overview



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Today, pistachios are grown in many cities and villages on the outskirts of the desert, especially in the eastern and southeastern regions of the country, the most significant of which are Damghan, Kerman, and Rafsanjan. Among all of the pistachio-growing regions in Iran, the products of Damghan, Kerman, Rafsanjan, and Sirjan are known as having a much higher quality compared to others. Moreover, historical evidence has demonstrated that the aforementioned cities host some of the oldest pistachio trees in the country – going up to 400 years old. Yazd and Ardakan pistachios are also noted in historical documents, especially for their rigidity in saline and dry conditions.

Iranian pistachios come in many varieties, among which are Arbar Aghae, Kalleh Ghouchi, and Khanjari, particularly known for their superior quality. Particular to the region of Damghan is Kalleh Ghouchi, which happens to have the most dense nut and is mostly associated with exceptional taste. Badami pistachios, also known as Ahmad Aghaei pistachios with their colorful kernels and white shells are also native to the Damghan and Ardakan regions. Moreover, Abbas Ali pistachios are among the most famous products of Damghan.

Statistics have shown that the pistachio orchards in Iran have an extremely alternate bearing behavior with the pistachio trees bearing a dense cover of fruit in one year, and being almost devoid of any pistachios the next. The alternate bearing habit of the pistachio trees is known in some areas locally as "bozghanj" (in Persian: بَزْغَنْج). Traditionally, pistachio used to be sold with the hard shell and without any additives, as the shell would keep the fruit fresh for a long time after the harvest. There were markets where peeled and roasted pistachio nuts were sold. However, due to the loss of original flavor, these products normally had a comparatively limited market. To counter this issue, some of the sellers would preserve the peeled nuts from spoiling by soaking them in vinegar. Pistachio trees, especially the variants traditionally grown in Iran, are known as extremely resilient plants. Pistachios are among the few crops that do not require much water and are resistant to soil salinity. Therefore, many of the pistachio-rich regions in Iran are located near the desert edge. One of the methods of cultivating pistachios in the Damghan and Yazd regions was reportedly to plant pistachios with split shells by wrapping them in cotton and putting them in the soil. In this method, the nut was put into the soil with the split side facing upwards.

Over time, pistachio nurseries became commonplace – primarily in Kerman and Semnan provinces – that would soak pistachio seeds and plant them in black plastic bags filled with soil. Moreover,



the watering schemes have changed widely with most of the farmers adopting drip irrigation systems to water the plants in a timely manner, allowing the young plants to develop roots, stems, and leaves. These seedlings are planted in suitable intervals in the winter season, and they are watered once a week. Although the practice of directly planting pistachio seeds in the ground still exists today in Iran, many farmers choose to purchase seedlings from nurseries for improved performance on large-scale operations. The rest of the process is standard and similar to the approaches used currently in the American pistachio industry: after two years, when the pistachio sapling becomes well-branched and strong, the farmers graft a branch from an older, desired pistachio variety onto it using appropriate budding methods to produce new branches.



A traditional approach in cultivating pistachios in Iran was to graft desirable, high-yield varieties onto wild pistachio trees known locally as ‘baneh’ (In Persian: بَنِه, a.k.a. *Pistacia vera*). Although the result was usually a very low-yield tree with small-sized fruits, the nuts were noted by the locals as being very delicious and of high quality. These grafted pistachio trees started bearing fruit after 4 years and could continue to do so for up to 35-40 years. Grafters were paid based on the number of grafts they made. In many of the local communities in the pistachio-rich regions,



the people believed that pistachios and almonds were ‘friends’, and by planting them close to each other they would yield more.

In Sirjan (Kerman province), the harvesting of pistachio locally referred to as ‘Sabzpeste’ (سبزپسته) usually began in late September and continued until late November, which was known as the month of ‘pistachio cleaning’ (پسته پاک کنی). In the past, pistachio orchard owners would go to their orchards a few days before the start of the harvest. Many of the large-scale pistachio producers would settle in small, brick-walled cottages located in the orchard known as ‘sofe’ (صُفه) to begin the shaking of the pistachio trees. Depending on the need for manpower, men, women, and children called ‘pistachio cleaners’ (پسته پاک کن) would show up, and start the process of harvesting under the guidance of a supervisor (سرکارگر). Children, who were lighter and could easily climb trees were employed to pick pistachios from the branches of older trees. Women participated in collecting clusters and shaking pistachio nuts off them, while men, in addition to picking, were responsible for transporting pistachio loads.

