

AAINews

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Tales of Dates

When I ask people in UAE and Oman, what makes a good desert crop, the most common response is "the date". As you know, dates have long been the staple food for desert dwellers. Where there is an oasis, there are dates. I heard that there has been much fighting for the rights over oases in the past. Indeed, dates are highly adapted to arid conditions. Dates hate moisture during the pollination period, and can be grown with highly saline water. In some places the irrigation water for dates contains over 7,000 ppm of salt. In addition, date palm leaves grow side ways, creating shade that makes it possible to grow grass, fruits and vegetables beneath the palms. Date fruits are very high in calories and easy to preserve. They can be carried around as they are for over a year.

Although it might seem that date palms grow naturally in oases and that it is easy to cultivate the fruits, in reality rather a lot of work is involved. The most important thing in date palm cultivation is pollination. Around April, at souks in cities like Muscat, one can find something that looks rather like a rice scoop or ladle. On closer examination, one can see a split at the tip from which many small fruit-like substance protrude. Each is actually a stamen. In order to produce good quality dates, it is necessary to have good pollen and a good female plant. If pollination is unsuccessful, trees do not bear large fruits (as shown in the left hand photograph down) and therefore have no commercial value. Even after pollination, there is no rest for the date farmer. From May to June, fruits grow at great speed. Sometimes, as much as 40kg of fruits are produced on one branch and it is necessary to give support to the branch so that it won't break. Harvest time is from July to October, although the precise months differ from variety to variety. The busiest time is towards the end of July. After harvesting, people are still busy, cutting off old branches and attending to the stems.

All these things have to be done to produce high-quality dates. But at the same time, date varieties (of which there are some hundreds) are important. To grow saplings, lateral buds are cut and planted individually, and those which thrive, are sold in the markets. Prices vary substantially from sapling to sapling. Here in Oman, one sapling can cost anything from 1,500 yen to 12,000 yen. So, why don't people grow saplings from seeds? When we eat dates sold in markets and spit out their seeds, they easily germinate. However, as stated above, there are male and female dates and it is difficult to ascertain the sex of saplings until they have grown to a reasonably large size. In date palm farms, the ratio of male to female palms is one to ten. Three to four years after saplings are planted they start to bear fruits, and it takes a total of five years before fruits can be good enough to go on the market.

Dates are usually sold at special shops in souks. There are domestic varieties, although domestic varieties in Oman are said to not be of particularly high quality. There are also imported varieties from Saudi (these are of the highest quality), Iran, Iraq and Tunisia. Dates are not consumed solely by humans. Racing camels are also fed with dates to supplement their nutrition. I have also read that some dates are exported to Japan and used as an ingredient for the sauce that accompanies tonkatsu dishes.

(Zaitu in Salalah)



**Date fruits after pollination
(the dates on the right have not been pollinated)**



Date stamens used for pollination