

## Agriculture and farmers in Kurdish region <Part 4>

### Fruits production in Iraq

The Kurdish region is located in the northern part of Iraq. Using the arid and cool climate, fruit production is a main agricultural activity. Fruit is cultivated mainly on slopes in the mountain areas.

The most commonly grown fruit is apple, however walnut, apricot, pomegranate, peach and grapes are also widely cultivated. According to the farmers interviewed, apple and peach are for eating, apricot and grapes are for dried products, and pomegranate is used for juice. There is a variety of nuts sold in town markets.

Although I am not a fruit farming expert, the orchards looked as if they were relatively well looked after. Pruning, branches training, fruits thinning, weeding and application of agro chemicals are all commonly practiced. Fruits seem to be a comparatively lucrative crop. However, in the Kurdish region, fruits are largely grown in the northern part on the slopes. This makes large scale commercialization difficult. Under this circumstance, the farmers in the mountainous areas, where it is not possible to own a large piece of land, are trying to increase their income by switching to fruit cultivation from wheat cultivation. In other words, fruit farming provides promising income opportunities in the mountainous areas.

However, fruit farming in the Kurdish region has been severely affected by long years of fighting. In particular, the mountain areas are where fighting was especially severe, and farmers fled to Iraq and neighboring areas leaving their farms unattended. In the walnuts production area in Dohuk near the Turkish border, many people fled the area from fighting from 1975 until the early 1990s. During these years, their farms were unattended. I heard that people still cannot come back to their villages, and they live in nearby villages and come to their own villages just for harvesting the nuts. It is hard to live only with farming income. People are sustaining their livelihoods with supplemental income from pensions and temporary labor in the army.

In this situation, I visited an area where the Kurdistan Regional Government is providing support for expanding and extending fruit production. In the northern part of Dohuk, 10 apple cultivation project sites have been established, providing training for 250 farmers. In the neighboring area, apples introduced from Spain were provided to farmers for performance test. Farmers in the outskirts of the capital were growing apples and pomegranate for juice, while conducting experimentation of apples on part of their farms. Moreover, at the Ain Kawa Research Center in Erbil, experimentation is continuing targeting some 180 introduced varieties of apples and grapes.

Fruit cultivation takes a long time from introduction to

harvest. It also requires management throughout the year. As for apple cultivation, the extent of pruning and fruits thinning differed from farmer to farmer. Agro chemicals were used everywhere. Compost and chemical fertilizers were commonly applied after flowering. Irrigation is used between March and November, and in most cases well water is used in Erbil. In mountainous areas in Dohuk, there were some old irrigation channels along the steep slopes, however most of them are not maintained.

One of the challenges of fruit farming, like vegetable cultivation, is marketing. Generally, in the Kurdish region, fruit production areas are in the northern and western mountain areas far away from the consumers. Yet, transport of products is mostly done by farmers themselves. I never heard of any cases where a middleman was used for distribution. Farmers have to transport their products to consumer areas and sell them in the markets by themselves. Many small scale farmers do not have their own means of transport, and it is a huge burden for them to have to sell their own product. In addition, high quality import fruits also pose serious threats. The Kurdish fruit industry will not grow unless the quality of fruits improves to the level that is competitive with imported products, and unless solutions are found for improving the product distribution system. The area has the right environmental conditions for fruit cultivation. Therefore, if done properly, there is a good possibility for future growth of the industry.



Fruit farm in a mountainous area



Apple experimentation for introducing a new variety