

## **Eritrean Date Production: Making Noticeable Progress**

A Monthly Newsletter Prepared by the Public Relations Division, Issue No 66, December 2023

The Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) has been promoting date palm plantation ever since 2003. And to date, there are more than 23,000 date palm trees distributed in around 150 hectares of land, and have already



started bearing dates. Currently, many farmers are able to produce good quality dates, and five varieties were presented and tasted officially in the commemoration of World Food Day, and International Day for the Eradication of Poverty marked on 16 October 2023.

The Public Relations Division of the MoA has conducted a brief interview with some senior experts and farmers who made date production a reality.



Mr. Mussie Fekadu is Head of the Biotechnology Unit at the National Agricultural Research Institute (NARI), and is the National project coordinator of the date palm project. According to him, the project started with a hope to

reach a satisfactory level of production within five years starting from 2022. To achieve this goal, the MoA is continuously working in collaboration with various development partners, and organized regular theoretical and practical capacity-building programs. “For instance, a training on initiation, multiplication and acclimatization was given to five NARI- bio-technology staff for two weeks by Ms. Amel Ismael, a date palm tissue culture specialist.” He added.

Mr. Mussie outlined that the goal of the MoA is not to be limited in importing in-vitro date palm seedlings, but to strengthen the already established nurseries, where multiplication will take place. Eritrea is endowed with a vast area very favorable for date palm production.

So far three nursery sites have been established in Massawa, Gahtelay and Halhale. Even though, the imported seedlings come from a safe and qualified laboratory, they need to pass through different procedures in those nurseries before they are transplanted to their permanent places.

“Farmers participating in date palm production are carefully selected based on their readiness and knowledge. They are, then, provided with sufficient consultancy and continuous trainings at almost every stage of production.” He underlined.

Following all these endeavors, date palm production is growing at a very satisfactory pace, mainly in the Northern and Southern Red-sea regions of the country. Thanks to the overall efforts made, Eritrea was recognized as the ‘41st Date Producing Country’, in 23 March, 2022, in the 7th International Date Palm Conference, convened in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates.

This month, the MoA is planning to import 10,000 seedlings, and will distribute around 3400 vitro-plants to 15 identified medium-scale farmers in February 2024. According to the revised plan, around 60,000 date palm seedlings will be distributed by the end of 2024. Generally, the MoA’s goal is to reach 300,000 date palm trees by the year 2030.

Furthermore, Mr. Mussie indicated that the multiplication methods will follow three systems; namely through imported seedlings, tissue-culture and off-shoots. Farmers are provided seedlings for free in which a cost recovery agreement is made, so that they can pass-on offshoots to another farmer in three years. According to this deal, a farmer who takes 1000 seedlings, is required to return 1000 off-shoots in three to four years. This will, of course, boost the capacity of date palm seedlings of nurseries and distribution rate of production and distribution.

In conclusion, Mr. Mussie elaborated that the MoA's goal also includes establishment of well-equipped date packaging store. "So far, a design has been finalized, and is expected to be constructed soon in Gahtelay, Northern Red Sea region. The store is expected to create a great deal of opportunities not only for national market but for export as well."

### **• Date Palm Production in the Northern Red Sea Region**

Mr. Daniel Kesete is the Head of Horticultural Development Unit, and Coordinator of the Date Project in the Northern Red Sea Region. According to his briefing, the profile of date farming in the region can be explained as follows:

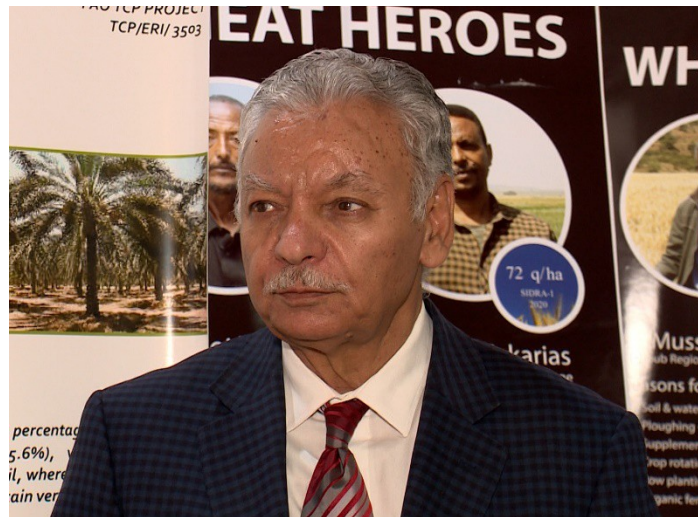




Date production in the Northern Red Sea Region started in 1996 by two enthusiastic farmers; namely Mr. Abdalla Sweyleh and Mr. Melake Ghebrekristos. The initiative of these two farmers inspired others to go for production of this sacred fruit. The transformative experience on date farming, however, appeared in 2017, in connection with the importation of 2000 tissue-culture-developed seedlings by the MoA. After carrying out careful study, these seedlings were distributed to well-identified beneficiaries, including households, as part of the preliminary stage. The outcome was promising in that the seedlings which got proper treatment started to bear fruits in their third year. The experience was also demonstrative, and some seedlings were also distributed from Massawa Nursery to many parts of the country.

According to Mr. Daniel, to date, the number of date farmers in the region has increased to 230. A number of households are also involved in planting few number of date palms within their premises. “Planting one date palm is like having a dairy cow because a single date palm tree can bear fruits which deliver equivalent to a milk sales from a cow”

- **Brief comments from Dr. Abdallah Ben Abdallah**



Dr. Abdallah Ben Abdallah, a Tunisian, is a widely respected international consultant and senior expert in date palm production. He came to Eritrea in 2017, and has been closely working with the MoA, by providing both theoretical and practical trainings to experts and farmers.

Dr. Abdallah confirmed that date palm can appropriately be produced in Eritrea with internationally acceptable quality standard. “Having this fact at hand, we are working to enable the country to be one of the date-producing countries with remarkable capacity.” He assured.

He further outlined that more than four of the nine imported varieties have performed very well in Eritrea. He also expressed his confidence that Eritrea, in collaboration with development partners like IFAD, FAO and UNDP will reach the set target of 300,000 date palm trees by the year 2030. By then, it would fully graduate in to a date-exporting country.



- **Date Palm Producers**



Mr. Abdalla Sweyleh is one of the pioneers date farmer in Eritrea. Having resided in Saudi Arabia for a long time, he returned, along with his family, to the homeland, soon after independence. He always dreamed of the possibility that Eritreans can enjoy domestically produced date varieties. Mr. Abdalla was actually inspired by his experience as a laborer in several date farms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He was confident that the eastern lowlands of Eritrea, where he grew up, could be remarkably appropriate for date production. Hence, for a long time, he was more inclined to making savings in a bid to invest in date farming. He and his family started to work heavily in preparing the concessionary land for date seed planting, which took place in 1996. Three years

later, he planted date seedlings which were made available to him by NARI, and ever since, Mr. Abdalla went through a great deal of financial hurdle that many people didn't even see his initiative.

His patience had to endure a lot until he realized the initial turnover of his longstanding investment that was also partially anchored on a credit program from the National Investment and Development Bank. Meanwhile, Mr. Abdalla has always enjoyed technical support and training by the MoA, and he was supplied with seedlings of improved date varieties from again NARI. This farmer was further provided with an opportunity for exposure visit to Tunisia, where he could learn a lot and acquired pragmatic knowledge on date farm management. Therefore, Mr. Abdalla was awarded by the MoA as an exemplary farmer on the occasion of commemorating World Food Day 2023, for his extraordinary contribution in date production. He also just concluded preparation to plant 250 more seedlings of improved date varieties.

- **Massawa International Airport**



Mr. Saleh Ahmed is the Manager of the date farm at Massawa International Airport. The farm was established in 2003. He indicated that they had no thorough knowledge on date palm cultivation when they made such a farming engagement 17 years ago. Therefore, the date palm seedlings they planted during that time couldn't be as productive as what they had anticipated. "However, Thanks to the training we got from the MoA, and the subsequent assessment of the work and work methodology, we are in a position to develop

the necessary expertise with regards to scientific date farm management system.”

According to him, the number of date palms planted by the farm until the year 2020 was limited to 260. In the course of the three years that followed, however, they were encouraged to plant immensely with the availability of imported improved varieties by NARI, and thus witnessing a quadruple increase in the farm’s number of trees.

“Currently, we have acquired a capacity of harvesting up to three quintals of date per tree, and we have 31 experts who obtained advanced training by the MoA, and hence are capable of technically managing the farm very well,” Mr. Saleh said.

- **Eritrean Crop and Livestock Corporation, Gahtelay Branch**

Eritrean Crop and Livestock Corporation (ECLC), Gahtelay Branch, has also been involved in date farming activities since 2017. The initiative began with planting of 345 seedlings of nine improved varieties. A training course on date palm management, which was organized by the MoA, was helpful for the corporation’s experts in multiplying the improved varieties through suckers.



Mr. Adem Osman, an Agricultural Expert working for the ECLC-Gahtelay Branch, explained that Gahtelay area is very suitable for date production, and that there is an extensive unexploited area suitable for this purpose. He also went



on giving his expert opinion and said: “I believe that the government should step up endeavors towards exploiting this potential”.

Mr. Abdu Hamd Gebir Idris is a date farmer in Htumlo, at the outskirts of the port city of Massawa. He started his farm in 2017 by planting 400 local date palms. Gradually, he started planting seedlings of imported varieties from NARI, and extended his farmland to a total of 16 hectares. Mr. Abdu disclosed, “I am already encouraged by the level of my harvest from last autumn. I believe this harvest rate will rise to a more abundant quantity in the coming years. I am already encouraged by this experience to expand the scope of my farm.”



Mr. Tesfamichael Teklemichael is a farmer who is engaged in date farming in Demas, Ghinda’e Sub-zone of the Northern Red Sea Region. With prior substantial experience in vegetable farming, he didn’t actually intend to end up in date farming at the beginning, but he had a compelling reason. Seeing that his vegetable yield was declining from time to time, he approached MoA’s experts for technical support in solving the problem, which was actually complicated and entailing many factors. The experts, on their behalf, assessed his farm, and taking into account the overall potential he had, they recommended that he switched to date palm farming.



Mr. Tesfamichael narrates his story as follows: “Initially, I didn’t dare to make such a significant shift, because I had no idea about the merits of date palm. After gathering reliable information from concerned experts and considering success stories of promising date farmers, I decided to take the action. So, I got 550 seedlings of improved date varieties from NARI, besides theoretical and practical training on date farming. I would also like to mention that extension agents have been working closely with me ever since then. As a result, my farm is on the verge of a promising future. My decision has influenced some farmers in my vicinity too. The goal in mind is to grow in to an exemplary farmer, and I am sure that I can secure abundant harvests on the basis of perseverance and sustained hard-work.”



Meanwhile, families were also encouraged to plant improved varieties of date palm seedlings at household level in both administrative regions. Mrs. Berhana Okbe, a veteran freedom fighter residing in Massawa, is one of the individuals who pursued such a plan of making backyard plantations of date palm. She planted two seedlings in 2021 on the advise of experts, and took good care of them while attending the training sessions which were provided by the MoA on this subject. “I am already encouraged by the progress I have noticed so far, and I am looking forward to establish a small date farm,” she said. Mrs. Berhana has already influenced a number of women in her vicinity.

- **Date Palm Production in the Southern Red Sea Region**



The Southern Red Sea region is another vast area of date farming potential for Eritrea, and Mr. Ahmed Khasem is one of the date farmers there, with his farm in Menkaekae. Prior to his engagement in date farming in the year 2000, he worked as a fisherman and merchant for a long time. He started his farm by directly planting 12 seeds, and kept on increasing the number of his date palms gradually. At this time, he has attained a harvest rate of 50 to 150 kilograms per tree from the improved date varieties, and owns 400 date palms in total.

“I had no knowledge of agriculture when I made such a career shift. Thanks to the technical support and training opportunities I got from the MoA, I have acquired working knowhow and experience on date farming. Now, I am looking forward to increasing the number of my date palms to 1000,” – these are Mr. Ahmed words, highlighting previous experience and aspiration as a farmers.



Mr. Yusuf Ahmed is another date farmers from Abo village of the region. He had similar background before he made a shift to the realm of agriculture, especially date farming. The number of his date palms grew steadily from 12 to 250. Mr. Yusuf has also been planting pepper, tomato, cotton, barley and grass underneath his date palms and along the borders of his land plot. Concerning the importance of formal knowledge among farmers, he said, “The trainings we got at different times regarding date farm management have indeed upgraded our farming skills. So, I would like to suggest that increased efforts are made in the future to train each farmer debuting in this activity.

**Dec 9, 2023**