

Everything you ever wanted to know about pistachios

By **JULIA HOLLISTER**
For the Capital Press

Compared to other U.S.-grown nuts, pistachios are the “youngsters.”

“Pistachios are not native to California,” said Bob Klein, manager of the California Pistachio Research Board. “Early goldminers likely brought in some and there were pistachios in the state by the 1870s.”

However, pistachios were mostly a novelty and didn’t become established as an industry until the mid-1970s.

The plantings were based on a variety that came from seed collected by a USDA plant explorer, W.E. Whitehouse, in Persia — now called Iran — in 1929 to 1930, he said.

In California today about 320,000 acres are planted to pistachios: about 250,000 bearing and the rest non-bearing.

“Iran has the greatest number of acres but California commonly produces more pistachios,” he said.

The U.S. produces 35-40



Courtesy Calif. Pistachio Research Board
Bob Klein, manager of the California Pistachio Research Board, advises potential growers to do their homework. It takes about six years before trees bear nuts.

percent of the global supply and Iran produces 25-30 percent, with Turkey, Syria and Greece accounting for most of the rest, he said. There is some production in Italy, Spain, France, Chile, Argentina, Australia and Afghanistan.

Iran competes on price while California growers

compete more on quality, he said. Few Iranian pistachios are imported.

According to Klein, prospective growers should have a lot of patience.

Pistachios are hard to grow and require lots of capital due to the long non-bearing period — 6 years on average.

They are frequently planted in partnerships. Consequently, the research board tracks growing entities rather than individual growers. There are about 1,200 growing entities in California.

Trees typically flower in late March or early April. There are male and female trees, about one male for every 24 females and are wind

pollinated. Nuts are produced only on the female tree.

“Farming in general is not easy,” he said. “When pistachios were first beginning in California, people thought they had no pests or diseases and were drought-tolerant.”

While they can survive with little or no added water, they won’t produce without adequate water. They have a wide number of pests and diseases that require timely control but compared to other crops can be grown successfully in a wide range of soil types and will tolerate modestly saline irrigation water, he said.

“While I wouldn’t say pistachios are particularly sensi-

tive or difficult, growers have to be aware of pests and diseases, monitor then appropriately and make sure to control the pests in a timely manner,” he said. “Irrigation timing can be critical as well for a good, high-quality crop.”

Navel orangeworm is the most significant insect pest for pistachios — and some other tree nuts — and control is difficult.

What researchers call large bugs (stink bugs and leaf-footed bugs) also can be important and control is difficult because they are mobile, difficult to monitor and the damage shows up days or weeks after they have left.

“The nuts are harvested

fresh from the tree and taken directly to the processor, where the hull is removed and the nuts dried to a stable moisture of 5-7 percent,” Klein said. “The timing is critical — the hulls must be removed within 24 hours or the shells become stained and unsightly, precluding use for in-shell snacking.”

Dried nuts are stored in large silos and then conveyed into the processing plant for sorting and sizing. Nuts can then be roasted/salted/flavored and then bagged, he said.

“Roasting, in addition to imparting flavor, also eliminates food-borne pathogens,” he said.



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