

# Pistachios: Growing in popularity

By **JULIA HOLLISTER**  
For the Capital Press

Tom Coleman says he is tired of the bad rap pistachios get.

“The biggest misinformation the public has about pistachios is that they are fattening,” he said. “In fact, they are actually one of the healthiest foods available — healthy fats, fiber, protein, antioxidants and other good stuff — and best of all, California is the largest producer of pistachios in the world.”

The second largest supplier is Iran. Coleman said Iran does undercut the U.S. on price, but the quality of nuts from that nation is much lower.

Currently, there are 485,865

acres of pistachio trees in California. Of those 371,742 acres are producing and 114,121 acres are new plantings.

Coleman first started growing pistachios as a nurseryman in 1978 because investors were looking to plant the trees. In 1982, he started farming pistachios for himself. He now has farms in Fresno, Madera and Merced counties.

It takes five to seven years to get the first crop and generally that first crop does little more than cover the cost of harvest. It can take 10 years to



**Tom Coleman**



Wikipedia

**Pistachios ripening on a tree.**

get to a profit.

Asked what challenges the industry faces, Coleman said the navel orange worm is a problem, but he said the

biggest challenge is one all of agriculture in California faces: the lack of water. There is a desperate need to create more surface storage for

water to be captured in the wet years.

But the upside is pistachios are relatively easy to grow.

“Pistachios are shaken off the tree but don’t touch the ground like other tree nuts,” Coleman said. “We use a receiver to catch the nuts and move them into bulk containers.”

Harvesting the nuts usually begins in late August and finishes the first week of October.

One set of machines can do about 15 acres a day.

Here’s how it works: The huge shaker pulls up to the tree and clamps onto the trunk, about 12 inches above the ground. The catcher then pulls up to the tree and lowers its flipper. The shaker then

extends its deflector over the catcher’s flipper and starts the shake for 3 to 5 seconds.

After the nuts are shaken off the tree they go onto a conveyor belt on the catcher and into trailers. A blower removes most of the leaves and the rest are worked back into the soil. The rest of the nuts go to processors in Fresno, Kern and Tulare counties.

Coleman said there is room in the industry for more pistachio growers.

“I try to convince anyone that can afford to go into pistachios to do it,” he said. “The problem is that it takes a lot of money and a long wait for any positive cash flow, ... but overall, I think it is a fantastic investment.”

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