



Modern Orchard Techniques Flourish in an Ancient Afghan Valley

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Fruit farmers whose families have tended orchards for decades in Balkh province are now using new techniques and tools to increase their yield and income. High-density planting in new orchards is also showing that it is more profitable to grow fruit than opium poppies, leading to changes in land use. The transformation in these established and new orchards is a result of the National Horticulture and Livestock Project (NHLP) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, financed by the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF).
In a lush green valley wedged between jagged red cliffs, fierce-looking men worry over tender fruit. This is tradition in the surprisingly fertile land that springs from mountain-fed streams, transforming dusty, desert plains into an oasis of orchards for pomegranate, almonds, figs, persimmon, and other exotic fruits. For centuries, people have marveled at the valley as they navigated Afghan trade routes. Today, the villagers of Mula Sultan occupy the land in the Khulm district of northern Balkh province, about an hours drive from Mazar-e-Sharif and a determined group of farmers are trying to resurrect its flagging orchards. The farmers are acquiring modern orchard planting techniques and know-how designed to improve their fruit yield and family incomes, with the support of the National Horticulture and Livestock Project (NHLP) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, financed by the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). The NHLPs objective is to assist producer households in adopting improved practices to increase horticulture productivity and overall production. To accomplish this, the project is supporting farmers in rehabilitating existing orchards and establishing new ones. Since 2009, about 19,600 jeribs (3,920 hectares) of land in seven northern Afghan provinces have been transformed into fruit orchards, says NHLP coordinator Ahmad Fahim Jabri. In Balkh province, about 4,080 jeribs are now devoted to orchards. This is a significant change in Balkh because just six years ago about 50 percent of the total land currently used for orchards was likely allotted to cultivate opium poppies or producing hashish, says Jabri. The NHLP has slowly demonstrated that high-density planting in orchards results in fruit production worth five times an opium crop. He adds "As people see these orchards, they see the benefits and move away from opium. They can make a lot of money without the disturbances that come with opium now. New techniques increase production. In Mula Sultan village, there is already a long tradition of orchard cultivation, not opium production. But the problem here has been low fruit yields caused primarily by pests like the Carob moth, which destroy pomegranate, almond, and date plants. Picking apart a young green pomegranate about the size of a walnut, farmer Ahmad Shah, 55, flicks a finger at a squirming moth larvae already feeding on his fruit. "This is what we are all fighting, says Shah, whose family has tended orchards on eight jeribs in the valley for at least 150 years. The moth launches its attack by laying eggs on young fruit. Larvae burrow inside, feed and finally spoil the pomegranates. Before NHLP workers set up farmer field schools in the valley to teach techniques to fight the moth, only 20 percent of the fruit set would succeed in reaching the market. Yield has now increased to about 80 percent, says Shah. This transformation came about after another villager, Sayed Ahmed, 61, was chosen as lead farmer to help teach the field schools. In one class, with the help of Sayed Ghulam Mohammad, a pest management and disease control officer, Ahmed demonstrated the incredible benefit of tying specially-designed brown paper bags over young fruit before moths could lay their eggs. "When we put the pomegranate in the bag, it gets big and healthy. We can lock it inside and the moth cant get in, explains Ahmed. "Yes, farmers didnt know how to identify, control, or manage these pests and diseases, adds Mohammad. "But now they can learn together and ask my help, too. Shah recalls when he first tried the bags, "many of my friends were laughing at me, but then they realized what good quality fruit I produced, and it was okay. So far, with the help of NHLP classes, farmers have been taught techniques for establishing efficient irrigation, weed control, use of safe insecticides, pruning, packing fruit, and, harvesting says Ahmed. "This is a very supportive project. It is seriously taking care of our orchards, he observes. Organic methods replace pesticides. Farmers in the valley recall a time, about a decade ago, when Korean officials refused a massive shipment of Afghan pomegranates because the fruit had been sprayed with poisonous pesticides. "Now the program has taught us organic methods for pest control and we have completely stopped using such chemicals, says farmer Abdullah Samadi, 50. Another recent innovation involves pruning. Many farmers didnt realize properly trimmed branches meant more energy devoted to ripening fruit elsewhere, says Samadi. It also helped control diseases, and more sunlight on trees meant better quality fruit. "This project is working educationally, technically, and practically for us. Farmers have also been exposed and offered access to a range of quality equipment, including pruning shears, sprayers, harvest baskets, and protective clothing in addition to the moth bags. While gear is initially provided for free of charge for group demonstration purposes, further project support to individual farmers requires them to pay about half of the cost of the equipment offered. Jabri admits this is not popular, but program officials believe that farmers who make an investment are more likely to value it. "Our economy is weak to pay for all these things, shrugs Samadi. "And we cant find many of these items in our markets anyway. Jabri points out that cheaper equipment often break after a few uses. "It doesnt matter, adds Samadi. "We are all doing better now, so maybe soon we can afford everything. The World Bank
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