

## Potential opportunities of organic pomegranate production in Azerbaijan

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Some believe that the fruit in the Garden of Eden was really a pomegranate

Azerbaijan is one of the origin centers of pomegranate (*Punica granatum* L.). The cultivation of the pomegranate has a long history in Azerbaijan where decayed remains of pomegranates dating back to 1000 BC have been found. According to N.I.Vavilov the origin centers of pomegranate are Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Turkmenistan. The wild pomegranate is also found in Azerbaijan.



Pomegranate adapts to all kinds of soil and climate; it is tolerant of drought, salt, iron chlorosis and active calcium carbonate. It typically grows below 1000 m in altitude, is mainly confined to the tropics and subtropics and grows well in arid and semi-arid climates. Favorable growth takes place where winters are cool and summers are hot. It has the ability to withstand frosty conditions, but below  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  will not survive long. A temperature of  $38^{\circ}\text{C}$  and a dry climate during fruit development produces the best quality fruits. Areas with high relative humidity or rain are totally unsuitable for its cultivation, as fruits produced under such conditions tend to taste less sweet and are prone to cracking. Pomegranate shrub is cultivated in lowland and foothills regions (Goychay, Aghsu, Aghdash, Kurdemir, Ismailli, Lenkeran, Masally, Shemkir etc.) of Azerbaijan. The Kur-Araz lowland is the largest area where pomegranate is cultivated. But the quality and medicinal properties of pomegranate varies according to the growing regions. So, the highest quality and special pomegranate



varieties are cultivated in Goychay region. Even there is a special variety (Cheyirdeksiz) that its seed is so soft that people named it “seedless”.

Since 2000, “Pomegranate Holiday” has been held in Goychay and demonstrated various delicious products of local pomegranate varieties (Guloyshe, Balamursel, Girmizigabig, Nazikgabig, Shah nar, Girmizi melez). As an extension of the Pomegranate Holiday, every year the Pomegranate Days are held in Baku. During this festival every comer is gifted with a pomegranate and foreign embassies are presented with pomegranate baskets.

In 1998 the total pomegranate production of Azerbaijan was 34,000 tons of which in Goychay region the annual pomegranate production was 7536 tons. Recently the area of pomegranate plantations is 3500 ha only in Goychar and this is twice higher than past years. This year over 40 thousands ton pomegranate yield is expected. Presently there are about 10 thousands ha of pomegranate plantations in Azerbaijan and there have been applied the traditional farming methods without use of agrichemicals (synthetic fertilizers and pesticides). Pomegranate shrubs are one of the easier fruits to work with since they are not usually affected by many pests or diseases. So, it creates great opportunities to grow pomegranate crop in Azerbaijan under organic farming rules.

AZNAR, ShahNar, AZPLODEKSPORT LLC and Suleyman enterprise are the leading companies in processing, trading and exporting of pomegranate products in Azerbaijan. Fifteen member of Ganja Agribusiness Association are engaged in organic pomegranate and processing. Three of them are running pomegranate processing facility. One of the biggest pomegranate processor in Azerbaijan is “Suleyman” enterprise who is a member of GABA. The enterprise has ISO 9001/2000 and HACCP certificates and decided also to get organic certificate from AZEKOSERT Ltd an Azeri organic certification body in order to produce organic pomegranate juice, pomegranate wine and nardasha products. GABA’s extension service provides its members with consultation in order to increase organic pomegranate



production and increase quality of it. But the pomegranate is not only sold as a fresh fruit and also as processed products (juice, sauce, wine, concentrate). In order to ensure sustainable organic pomegranate production for pomegranate processing industry, GABA makes visits to big processing and trading companies. As result of these visits business partners (processors, traders, supermarkets etc) have agreed to pay for extension and also certification expenses of organic producers.

Production is increasing due to higher demand for pomegranate products, especially juice, as the health benefits of pomegranate are realized. Pomegranate juice is one of the unique products in the world. It gives opportunities to increase the pomegranate production in the condition of low competition with other agricultural products. Organic status of the pomegranate products gives additional added value and price premium to these products. For the export purpose these products should be certificated against HACCP, organic standards. In this field the Azerbaijani state started to work. Thus, according to the state program of “Reliable provision of people with foods” production and processing companies should be applied HACCP standards and other accepted food safety standards during 2008-2015 years. According to FIBL statistics on Global Organic Survey 2008 the area of organic pomegranate orchards was 90 ha. But this year it’s expected to increase this figure twice in the increasing demand and market for organic pomegranate products.

The great part of pomegranate production in Azerbaijan is exported to Russia. At the same time for the past few years nearly 65 thousands ton high quality pomegranate juice and pomegranate wine in the local processing enterprises. The main markets of pomegranate products (fresh pomegranate, pomegranate juice, pomegranate wine, nardasha) are Russia, Ukraine and European countries.

### **References**

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