

Nuts aplenty in state harvest season



Bulk nuts for sale at Sprouts on 4282 N. 1st Ave. in Tucson, Ariz. on Oct. 19, 2015. Arizona tree nut farmers have had a good harvest this year. (Photos by Annie Dickman/Arizona Sonora News)

It's a good year for Arizona tree nut farmers. Expectations for Arizona's fall harvest have been high and it's an "on year" for both pistachios and pecans at Cochise Groves and the Green Valley Pecan Co.

Agriculture is a large boon to Arizona's economy, especially in the fall. It's a **\$17.1 billion business** and has experienced 40 percent growth over the last 20 years, according to Julie Murphree, the director of communications for the Arizona Farm Bureau.

AZ GDP = \$290 billion, so \$17.1B is ~6%.

"Harvest time is fun time," Murphree said.

In 2012 Arizona produced 20 million pounds of pecans with a value of \$32 million, which is **no chump change**.

As for pistachios, their growth gives more \$15 million to Arizona and New Mexico with their major producer, California, raking in more than \$1.16 billion according to the American Pistachio Growers.

AZ & NM = 1.3% of CA

In 2014 the United States exported \$2.7 billion worth of tree nuts, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

That is up 20 percent compared to last year, according to a USDA report, and also sets a record for exports since 1970.

The amount of nuts being exported aren't the only things going up. In 2004-2014 the prices of pecans rose from \$3 a pound to \$5.40 and the prices for pistachios have jumped from \$2.25 to \$5.50 according to an article published by the Arizona Republic.

Pistachios

Pistachio harvests in Arizona usually take place anywhere from late August to October. For Cochise Groves, the pistachio harvest started in August.

"It was a pretty good year," said Jim Graham, owner of Cochise Groves. He and his wife, Ruth, have been harvesting pistachios in Arizona since 1998 when they took over the family business that Ruth's father had started in 1980.

Exact numbers haven't been calculated yet, but their harvest is thought to be a good one that exceeds expectations.

It was an "on" year for the 21,000 trees located on Cochise Groves' 160 acres of land. Pistachio trees are a biennial bearer, meaning that they alternate between having a large or small crop every other year.

Next year will bring a smaller yield for Cochise Groves, but Graham accepts this as the norm.

Prices of pistachios have increased significantly over the past 10 years, Graham said. However, Graham estimates that the cool down of China's rapid growth might mean a plateau in pistachio prices.

The U.S.'s pistachio market is dominated by Californian growers, who grow approximately 99 percent of the U.S.'s pistachio yield. Arizona and other states like New Mexico trail behind, but the popularity of the nut has made it an attractive choice to farmers.



The continuing drought in California has strongly affected this year's crop yields with some Californian pistachio trees shooting "blanks." Blanks are when the green meat of the pistachio doesn't grow due to drought, lack of fertilization, unusual weather or other factors.

Bulk pistachios for sale at Sprouts on 4282 N. 1st Ave in Tucson, Ariz. on Oct. 19, 2015. Arizona pistachio growers have had a good harvest this year.

California has been hit by a triple whammy: drought, unusual weather and heat. During the winter pistachios need to reach cool temperatures, called chilling hours, to bloom properly.

But if temperatures don't stoop low enough, the male trees and female trees don't bloom at the same time. Many male trees then bloom late – too late to properly fertilize the female trees. This is something that has decreased the yield in some Californian farms coupled with the worsening drought.

In comparison, despite Arizona's 21-year-long drought, pistachio tree farmers here are confident about their own futures.

This is partially due to many, like Cochise Groves, relying on pumping ground water. In the long run this isn't completely sustainable due to shrinking ground water reserves, but so far it has served many farmers who don't rely on the Colorado River well.

"It's never easy," Graham said. "There are always challenges, but we do it because we love it."

Pecans

The pecan harvest in Arizona usually takes place around mid-November but can take place anywhere from early November to January.

Annually states like Georgia, the U.S.'s top producer of pecans, stay near the top but Arizona stays safely nestled in the top 5 depending on if it's an on or off year.

Pecan trees, like pistachio trees, are biennial bearers and also have on or off years. This is an on year for the Green Valley Pecan Company, one of the biggest growers and processors of pecans. They also act as the biggest exporter of pecans to Europe.

"It's looking pretty good," said Rich Walden, the farm manager for Green Valley Pecan Company.

Pecan trees are sturdy and long-lasting, and are known to produce nuts for over 100 years according to Walden as long as

they are taken care of.

“They do take some care,” he said.

There are many pests that can harm the trees that farms have to look out for, like the black pecan aphid and the yellow pecan aphid, which cause damage to the tree’s leaves. However, in comparison to the other states that produce pecans, the farms in Arizona have less pests to worry about due to the dry climate.

One of the main downfalls of making a home here in Arizona would be water worries, but some pecan farmer have been able to avoid them.

The pecan trees at Green Valley Farms are mainly maintained through ground water and a combination of flood irrigation and a sprinkler system. The farm is lucky due to its location nestled in a valley, which helps provide the water that it needs.

“We don’t get as much rainfall, but generally we’re okay,” Walden said.

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