

Prickly pears: 'humble' cactus brings hope to Algeria

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Prickly pears like these in Morocco are proving fruitful for growers in neighbouring Algeria

For generations Algerians like the Gueldasmi family have barely eked out a living growing prickly pear fruits, but thanks to the cactus's new found virtues their lives are steadily improving.

"Now, my future is here. There is no need to go abroad" to find work, said Fethi Gueldasmi, 40, whose family's revenues have been growing thanks to what agronomists and biologists now call the "green gold".

Scientific reports indicate that the *Opuntia* species of prickly pears which thrives in arid regions like Algeria's northern Sidi Fredj contains a plethora of virtues.

Everything from the cactus—once considered sacred by the ancient Aztecs—can be transformed to yield nutritional and medical benefits except for its prickly spines.

The green spiny discs known as cladodes are used for fodder while their tender inner flesh is a star of the cuisine of Mexico, where the cactus originated

and figures on its national flag.

Oil extracted from the seeds of fruit has antioxidant benefits and is used in cosmetics for its anti-ageing properties, besides being rich in vitamin C, calcium and magnesium.

The flowers of the cactus go into making herbal tea while the pulp of the red fruit is turned into juice, vinegar, jams and even sorbets.

A 2017 study by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) concluded prickly pears could be the answer to much of the world's food security woes and prevent soil erosion.

'Green gold'

In Sidi Fredj, once an impoverished town in the Souk Haras province bordering Tunisia, Gueldasmi, like his father and grandfather before him, farms prickly pears.

The fruit must be handled carefully to avoid being pricked by the sharp spines. And until recently it was harvested for its tasty, sweet flesh, which only fetched a pittance of 10 dinars (US 0.08 cents, 0.07 euro cents) a piece at the local market.

Since 2013 however all that has changed with the creation of a cooperative of farmers, scientists and traders in Souk Haras, with help from Mexico, to exploit and market prickly [pear](#) by-products.

A small factory was built in 2015 and oil was produced in small quantities before reaching 300 litres in 2017 and 1,000 litres in 2018.

The cooperative is hoping to increase the output seven-fold by the end of this year thanks to a new and bigger factory which opened at the end of last year.

One tonne of grains is needed to produce one litre

of oil, which can fetch more than 2,000 euros (dollars) in Europe.

Algeria's "green gold" is exported to France, Germany and Qatar and plans are being made to sell it in the United States as well, according to farmer Djamel Chaib.

Although Algeria—where most of the fertile land is free of pesticides—has no organic certification body, oil from Sidi Fredj obtained an "organic" label from European agencies and is sold as such abroad.



The FAO says that beyond its immense benefits, the "humble cactus" can help fight food insecurity, improve soil quality, promote barley plantations and may even help limit emissions of greenhouse gases.

'Crucial food supply'

"While most cacti are inedible, the *Opuntia* species has much to offer, especially if treated like a crop rather than a weed run wild," the FAO said in its 2017 report.

It highlighted the 2015 Madagascar drought in which the "cactus proved a crucial supply of food, forage and water for local people and their animals".

Around 80 percent of Algeria, Africa's largest country, is arid or semi-arid, providing an ideal terrain for farming prickly pears.

In Sidi Fredj, the Gueldsami family and others have seen their revenues increase thanks to farming and selling prickly pears.

Fathi said his family is now able to make home improvements and pay in cash for their groceries instead of signing IOUs.

His mother has also been saving money to carry out the hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. It is one of the five pillars of Islam and Muslims must undertake the hajj at least once in their lifetime.

"Now, my future and that of my (10-year-old) daughter is here. There is no need to travel abroad," he said.

Algeria is a country of 40 million where half the population is under 30, with one in three young people unemployed. Many dream of travelling to Europe to find a job and improve their standard of living.

Now "hundreds of families are making a living" from prickly pears, said Mohamed Mohamedi, who heads a farmer's cooperative in the region.

This includes women who take part in the harvest of prickly pears and young people.

No 'humble' cactus

The FAO said in its report that beyond its immense benefits, the "humble cactus" can help fight food insecurity, improve soil quality, promote barley plantations and may even help limit emissions of greenhouse gases.

A "cactus stores water in its pads, thus providing a botanical well that can provide up to 180 tonnes of water per hectare—enough to sustain five adult cows, a substantial increase over typical rangeland productivity," FAO said.

"Climate change and the increasing risks of droughts are strong reasons to upgrade the humble cactus to the status of an essential crop in many areas," said Hans Dreyer, director of FAO's Plant Production and Protection Division, in the 2017

report.

In Algeria, the farming of prickly pears has helped crop diversification as well, according to Khodir Madani, head of a university research laboratory, with farmers growing cereals and other crops among them.

Fethi's father, Youcef Gueldsami, agreed pointing to a few pistachio trees he planted alongside the cactus.

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