

# UAE wages war on tiny scourge threatening date palms

April 28 2020, by Aziz El Massassi

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An Abu Dhabi government worker injects a date palm to combat the destructive red weevil

Said Al-Ajani looks proudly over his lush date plantation, which recently survived a plague of red weevils—a destructive insect wreaking havoc

across the Middle East and North Africa.

"For 24 years, we cultivated our land normally. Then, we had to start spraying five to six times a year against the weevil," said the 60-year-old Emirati, wearing traditional robes with a red and white checkered keffiyeh.

In Wiqan, located in the United Arab Emirates but nestled against the border with Oman, he settles down on a carpet rolled out on the ground in the midst of his six-hectare plantation, to share lunch with his relatives and neighbours.

Fittingly, the meal served under the spreading palm fronds will end with succulent dates to accompany the coffee.

In the Arab world—and particularly during the holy month of Ramadan—the date is more than a fruit, it is a symbol of prosperity and hospitality, and it has played an important role in the development of nations carved out of these hot and arid regions.

It is this status that in December saw the [date palm](#) inscribed on UNESCO's list of humanity's intangible cultural heritage.

But the fan-shaped, long-leaved plant—the palm is in fact not a tree—is under serious threat from the red weevil, the world's most dangerous and destructive palm pest, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

The insect, which is native to Asia and a few centimetres in length, infiltrates the interior of the stipe—the false trunk of the palm—and produces hundreds of larvae which feed on the soft tissue inside, ultimately killing their host.



Red weevils, which can kill infested palms, cause millions of dollars in damages annually

### **Millions lost every year**

The bug, which is also a pest in coconut and oil palm plantations, began infesting date palms in the Middle East two decades ago, before creeping across Africa and Europe.

According to the FAO, 60 percent of the world's 100 million date palms are in the Arab world, which produces some 70 percent of date exports, with the UAE a leading exporter.

"The weevil causes economic losses in the millions of dollars annually, whether through lost production or pest-control costs" in Gulf countries and the Middle East, the UN agency said, making it a major economic issue.

Some of the dates exported by the UAE come from Al-Ajani's crop, which earns him about one million dirhams (around 250,000 euros) annually.

After previously spraying his 1,000 palms, he turned to a technique that is more effective and less harmful to the environment and human health.

In recent years farmers have carried out targeted injection of pesticides in cooperation with Abu Dhabi authorities, who since 2013 have run a project to control the palm pests.



Since 2013, Abu Dhabi has run an extermination programme to control invasive red weevils

## **Delicate operation**

Elsewhere in the area, other plantations are not faring as well. At another farm on the Oman border, a technical team sent by the agricultural authorities tackles a three-hectare field with a number of palm trees infested by the red weevil.

In white overalls, with masks on their faces and gloved hands, three workers carry out a delicate operation. One drills a hole inside the stipe so his colleague can thread a long, thin tube inside, while another worker takes out a large syringe and injects pesticide into the plant's core.

"Our research has shown that the technique of injecting pesticides instead of spraying is more effective in treating infested [palm](#) trees," Safaa Al-Hachem told AFP at a UAE laboratory where she studies the insect's behaviour.

At the lab, the insects and their larvae are enclosed in dozens of transparent jars where they suck honey or molasses, sweet foods that they thrive on.

The Abu Dhabi Authority for Agriculture and Food Security (ADAFSA) has carried out extermination at most of the 24,000 date plantations in Abu Dhabi and the number of infested plants has decreased by 33 percent since 2016.

But the intensive use of pesticides can pose risks to farmers, consumers and the environment.

"We limit the quantity of pesticide we injected because our goal is also to reduce environmental pollution," ADAFSA official Mansour Al-Mansouri told AFP, adding that they are also developing natural pest control methods.

They include pheromone traps—using molecules secreted by insects to which they are drawn. The technique, also used in Saudi Arabia which is another major date exporter, "has proven to be effective," the FAO said in a report this year.

Along with the UAE, Saudi is a major contributor to the organisation's programme to fight the red weevil, which helps countries with fewer resources like Mauritania, where the FAO says the spread of the red weevil has been arrested.

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