

The above data indicates that rainfed fruit trees are far more significant than irrigated trees, whether in terms of area (95-96 percent of total) or share in farm income (35 percent against 9 percent). A breakdown of area and income shows the relative importance of all major types of fruit trees. The following section contains a fairly detailed account of the economics of production of olives, grapes and almonds, and a brief review of plums, figs and apricots.

Olives

The olive tree is indigenous to Palestine and it has always played an important role in its economy, in addition to having a deep-rooted spiritual value.¹ It is a notably long-lived tree, it is commonly believed that some olive plantations may be so old that they date back to the Roman era! In most respects olive culture is the most important single farming pattern on the West Bank. As such, it has received special attention in this study.

Area and distribution

According to official statistics the area under olives in 1979 amounted to 734.7 thousand dunams, i.e. 79 percent of all the area under fruit trees and 40% of the total cultivated area. Interestingly, these ratios are considerably higher than those in Israel, where olives occupy at present only 3 percent of cultivated land, and 83 percent of that olive area is owned by Arabs.² Olives are grown with varying intensity in all West Bank geographical regions, except for the Jordan Valley and those overlooking hills where annual rainfall is usually below 250 millimeters. Its

1. The olive tree was cited with esteem in the Koran and Bible, and it was frequently related to the land of Palestine.

2. Statistical Abstract of Israel 1980, op cit, pp 356-365.

intensive dissemination is attributed to its hardiness and tolerance to a wide range of climatic and soil variations. Table (VII-2) shows that olive farming is concentrated in the northern districts (Tulkarm, Nablus and Jenin) which account for three fourths of area and output.

Although particularly suited for olives, the Hebron district is not an important producing area, as it is much better known for its grapes and stone fruits. In recent years, however, farmers in that district have embarked on a vigorous campaign of growing new olive orchards. Table (VII-2) shows that about half of all new plantations (around 26000 dunams) are grown in this district. Hebron farmers, evidently, have come to realize that they have too much more land under grapes which have proved particularly vulnerable to price problems arising from over-supply and perishability. Growing olives helps farmers stabilize income and exploit their marginal land resources, without having to put in very large investments in reclaiming rocky slopes, as they do for grapes.