

set. At this stage almonds are consumed fresh as a seasonal delicacy. Several weeks afterwards, the fruits pass through another edible stage when they can be picked half solid and sold at high prices in Amman markets. Most of the crop, however, is usually left to dry out, and then picked in mid-summer. After they are picked almond fruits are dressed of their wilting green cover, and then either stored as dry fruits or further shelled of their stone cover and stored as dry almond seeds.

It is difficult to project accurately the percentage of almonds consumed in the forms described above, since this depends largely on unpredictable market variations. But according to sampled farmers and technicians the distribution in most years is roughly as follows: 25 percent of the crop is picked green, 10 percent half-solid, and 65 percent in the solid stage.

Almond seeds are consumed fresh or toasted in brine water. But the bulk of dry seeds is used in making certain forms of popular sweets and confectionary.

Bitter almonds constitute around 10 percent of almonds in production. Their fruits are not fit for eating purposes, but they are also in strong demand, though at much lower prices than sweet varieties. They are channelled almost totally into Israel where they are used in the pharmaceutical industry.

According to official data, almonds contribute some 5-10 percent of gross agricultural income. While this is little less than the share of grapes, it is certainly considerably lower than that of olive and citrus.

However, despite their rather modest quantitative contribution, almonds could potentially play an important role in West Bank agriculture. This will be explored later in this section.

#### Consumption and exports

Although a fairly popular food item, the almond is not consumed in quantities comparable to those of olives or grapes. In the first place it is not considered as a staple food. Furthermore, almond prices have soared to a point where producers are tempted to turn more produce into the market, at the expense of home consumption. Due to its pronounced output variations, almond consumption varies widely from one year to another. According to respondents' estimates the quantity consumed locally (of dry almonds) is in the neighbourhood of 50 tons, ie. about one third of total output.

Almonds, in all their edible forms, are considered as basically export commodities. About 80 percent of green and half-solid almonds are exported to Jordan. Shelled almond seeds, on the other hand, have a wider export potential. About half of the exported produce goes to Jordan (and Syria) and the other half goes to Israel which, according to informed business sources, re-exports much of it to Cyprus and possibly thereafter to some Arab countries.

The flow of shelled almond seeds into Jordan (and hence to other Arab markets) has frequently been obstructed by problems arising from boycott regulations. Jordan was formerly reluctant to permit the entry of any almond seeds shelled in Israeli mills, which stimulated the establishment of the first West Bank almond shelling mill in 1977. Even now, it is suspected that some of Israel's much larger almond supply might be smuggled into Jordanian markets under a West Bank label.