

FARMING LIFE



Sam Cobb

PROVIDED BY SAM COBB

It's a Date

World's oldest cultivated tree crop thrives in the California desert



By Kit Bernardi

CALIFORNIA'S COACHELLA VALLEY IS a celebrated hot spot for festivals and golf tournaments. But the most important dates in the Colorado Desert region are those produced in the valley's date palm orchards.

Twenty miles southeast of greater Palm Springs' stylish hotels and golf resorts, thousands of acres of harvested date palms produce the majority of the sweet fruit grown in the United States.

An arid wind pulses through the orchard at Sam Cobb Date Farms on the outskirts of Desert Hot Springs. The majestic trunks of medjool date palm trees spiral straight up until they are engulfed in thick spikey

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leaf crowns sweeping back and forth across the cloudless sky. The leaves' rhythmic shushing overhead sounds like waves rolling on a green sea.

Cobbs' date palms produce the fruits of a lifetime spent learning about agriculture. The 13th of 15 children growing up in nearby Fresno County, he fell in love with farming at age 5 riding on the fender of a John Deere tractor driven by the neighborhood row crop farmer. His future career took root in high school when he joined the local chapter of what is now the National FFA (Future Farmers of America) Organization.

"I was the only Black kid in the organization," says the 61-year-old Cobb. "And now I'm the only Black date farmer in America, as far as I know."

During his 30-year career as a soil conservationist for the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, Cobb purchased this land and planted date palm offshoots that grew into these trees. Using a slender stiff leaf, he draws a pie chart in the sandy loam soil, and divides it into quadrants, each representing a quarter of the year.

"Dates do everything on time," he says. "Their predictable fruit production cycle pretty much exactly mirrors the calendar."

Dates are among the oldest known cultivated fruits in the world. The Coachella Valley grows predominantly medjool and deglet noor dates. During a calendar year, skilled workers called palmeros make an average of six trips up each adult female date palm. In January date palms are pruned, their thick 5-inch thorns removed.

In the spring, palmeros gather pollen from male trees' flowers (one male pollinates approximately 50 female palms), thin the female palm's flowers, and hand-pollinate them. Then, flowers are tied into bunches and spaced to dangle below the tree crown's

base. In hot summer months when the date fruit begins to ripen, workers cover the bunches with breathable bags to protect them from insects, animals and weather. Dates are harvested by hand from fall through December, depending on the variety.

Sam Cobb Date Farms is a niche grower, producing approximately 50,000 pounds of dates annually, including his own breed called Black Gold. Their distinctive flavor and texture originate from offshoots he extracted 21 years ago from a wild, female date tree on the side of the road.

Cobb credits the fruit's predictable life cycle and Maxine, his high school sweetheart and wife of 41 years, for making his childhood dream of being a successful farmer come true.

"On our first date 43 years ago, I asked Maxine, 'Can you see yourself being with a farmer?'" he recalls. "Lucky for me she said 'yes.'"

The couple married while Cobb was working on his undergraduate degree in agricultural education with an emphasis in plant science at California State University, Fresno, on a Bank of America scholarship.

After graduating, Cobb became a row crop farmer, but went bankrupt. He returned to Fresno State to study irrigation before starting his USDA career in Kings, Fresno, Imperial, and Riverside counties. Part of his job was to advise farmers on soil and water conservation to grow dates.

"While working for the USDA, it occurred to me that maybe, if we planned it all according to the date palm's fruit production cycle, I could be a date farmer by the time I retire," he says.

In 2002, the Cobbs sold their La Quinta, Calif., home to buy 5 acres in Desert Hot Springs. The couple has since bought an additional 110 acres in Blythe, about 100 miles to the east. Just like a dependable date palm, Sam's retirement plans came to fruition, on schedule. In



DOUBLE DATE PACKING

12%
RISE IN
REGIONAL DATE
YIELDS
SINCE 2018

SOURCE: California Date Commission

"The future ... is bright because increasing consumer preference for natural, healthy foods spurs demand for dates."

— ALBERT KECK,
president, Hadley Date Gardens



Processing dates

HADLEY DATE GARDENS

2019, he left the USDA to farm full time.

Now, Sam's farm operation is expanding, and he dreams of building a packing facility. He says, "The best way to ensure product quality is to control the packaging and selling of my dates."

FROM GRAPES TO DATES

The region, long a large-scale producer of table grapes, has seen

a steep decline in production in recent years. The California Desert Grape Administrative Committee's 2022 Annual Report says that Coachella Valley table grape production declined 48 percent between 2018 and 2022.

By contrast, date production has increased approximately 12 percent over the same period,

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AZIZ FARMS

To supplement date production revenue, Aziz Farms rents its packing facility for corporate and special events.



Sam Cobb and grandson Camden

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according to the California Date Commission, and the 2021 Riverside County Agricultural Production Report shows that date values have more than doubled since 2016.

Anthony Vineyards is one of the Coachella Valley's largest date producers and table grape growers. In the last decade, its grape production has declined nearly 50 percent.

Anthony Bianco, co-owner of Anthony Vineyards, is a third-generation Coachella Valley farmer. He attributes declining grape production to rising labor costs, quality control regulations and American-based retailers not buying from domestic farmers.

Growing premium-quality fruit

"comes at a cost which importers do not incur," Bianco says. For instance, he says, California growers pay minimum wage, provide safer working conditions and adhere to the state's strict food safety standards and environmental protection policies.

"Many retailers are unwilling to pay a higher price for our premium product, instead choosing to purchase imported, less-expensive fruit."

INNOVATE AND DIVERSIFY

Third-generation farmer Albert Keck is president and owner of Hadley Date Gardens, one of the region's largest commercial date operations. He is also president of Western Growers and chair of

the California Date Commission. He says date producers face the same labor costs, regulations and economic challenges as grape growers. Although concerned, he is optimistic.

"The future for California date growers is bright because increasing consumer preference for natural, healthy foods spurs demand for dates," he says. "We're implementing forward-thinking initiatives to address costs, marketplace consolidation and global trade forces, all without sacrificing fruit quality."

Hope Barbee, vice president of sales for Double Date Packing, agrees, and says environmental initiatives are among her company's top priorities. All the operation's buildings in Coachella are solar powered, for instance, and Barbee oversaw the design and creation of the date industry's first recycled plastic pouch packaging, which is also lighter and less bulky.

Mark Tadros, president of Aziz Farms in Thermal, Calif., oversees a family business employing 18 full-time workers to tend the orchard, pack and ship 2 million pounds of dates produced by Aziz Farms and other Coachella Valley growers.

Aziz Farms also custom grows produce from heirloom seeds for chefs at several area restaurants, including Aric Ianni at Booze-hounds, which was recently added to the California Michelin Guide, Reese Murakami at June Hill's Tables and Katherine Gonzalez of Chula Artisan Eatery.

The organic farm also rents its packing facility, called The Packhouse, for corporate and special events.

"Farming is not a very profitable endeavor, so to pay for the farming side of our business, we have diversified as a company," Tadros says.

Enterprising farmers have grown dates in the Coachella Valley for over 100 years. Healthy date palms can live for a century or more. Sam Cobb is banking on their longevity.

Gazing up at the dense bunches of shiny, ripe dates, he says, "I work and pray that these orchards will bear fruit for my family for generations to come."