

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Dates find a prodigious home in the Coachella Valley

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

"It's a date!" the title of the thin tome proclaims with a cheeky wink. Chronicling the Coachella Valley date industry from a 1930s perspective, this book, written by Wayland Dunham, takes an amused view of this agricultural wonder. The publication recounts the facts in great detail, in "a simple yarn, told in lighthearted, non-technical terms, of the history, romance, propagation, and usage of the fruit of the Date Palm..."

The date palm (phoenix dactylifera) is one of man's oldest cultivated plants going back not just centuries in history, but millennia. Dates appeared in cultivation in California in the latter half of the 18th century at the Spanish missions up and down the coast. However, the coastal climate wasn't particularly conducive for date production.

In the late 1800s, date seeds and offshoots were imported from Egypt, Algeria and the Persian Gulf to the arid southwest of the United States. In 1904, the U.S. Department of Agriculture established an experimental agricultural station in the Coachella Valley devoted to the cultivation of dates. Different varieties, both from offshoots and seeds were tried.

In the following decades, crop production grew exponentially, from approximately 100,000 pounds in 1919 to 1 million pounds in 1926, and then by 1955 to 48 million pounds of dates. Ultimately, some 85 percent of U.S. date acreage was situated in the Coachella Valley. This production ultimately derived predominantly from 14,000 offshoots of the Deglet Noor variety imported from Algeria.

The Coachella Valley was, and is, uniquely endowed with favorable conditions for date production. The arid landscape, artesian water and high temperatures produce the highest quality of dates — sweet and plump.

Gorgeous groves of date palms planted in stately rows were interspersed



Date palm trees grow in Indio. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

with citrus trees and stretched for miles. The prodigious output of the oasis of the Coachella Valley, rivaling that of the Middle East, created such abundance that new descriptions of the place such as Allah's Garden or Our Araby became common.

The city of Indio annually sponsors a date festival, a tradition now dating back some 70 years. Over the decades, this elaborate celebration has featured

camel races, Arabian dances, date judging and, of course, a harem of princesses.

Also since the early days, many residential sections of every city in the valley have been built upon former date farms, as owners slowly acceded to development. Building and selling houses seemed easier than date cultivation. Remnants of groves persist, however, and continue to delight tourists when



The Indio Date Festival's Queen Scheherazade and her court pose for photos in February 1965.

PALM SPRINGS LIFE MAGAZINE FILE

they happen upon soldiering rows of these tall handsome trees in the middle of Rancho Mirage or Palm Desert.

Over the years, retail outlets sprung up advertising the unique sex life of the date, since reliable propagation requires the help of man. In March each year, the long sharp thorns sticking out between the leaves are removed to allow for mechanical pollination. Strands of pollen from the male trees are cut and tied next to the female flowers just after they have opened, or alternatively, pollen is dusted into the flowers on a small powder puff. Workers carefully cover the fruit with bags as it begins to ripen. Dates, therefore, are a very labor-intensive crop.

One such firm, Shields Date Gardens in Indio, opened in 1924 and still offers to ship the fruit. There's a lunch counter unchanged over many decades at which one can sample a naturally sweet date shake. Oh, and then there's their movie on the unusual sex life of the date palm. It's a classic.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.