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## BACK FROM THE BRINK: RESCUING THE BARGOU PEACH IN TUNISIA

Preliminary results with water harvesting show promise for restoring the biodiversity and productivity of large areas of communal rangeland in eastern Morocco

The Bargou peach has been grown by smallholder farmers in the Siliana district of northwestern Tunisia for generations. Sweet and delicious, the fruits are popular with consumers, but farmers had lost interest in the variety because of disease, pests and agronomic problems that were reducing the quality and yields of fruit from their trees. drought tolerant.



A new beginning: a young Bargou peach tree holds promise for the future of this indigenous peach cultivar.

*Source: "pictures from project managers"*

### Points to Consider

- Gaining the confidence of traditional farmers can be a slow and painstaking process.
- Reviving interest in orphan crops depends on a market for the product and sustained technical support to farmers.
- Measures such as protected product status may be needed to ensure sustainable economic benefits.

### Purpose

This brief is intended to raise awareness among research and extension agencies, policy makers, donors and rural development specialists of the possibility of rescuing indigenous crops and their benefits for sustainable rural development.

### Suitability

The approach employed by this project can be employed in all smallholder production systems, being based on thorough and rigorous diagnostic work, a participatory approach, clear targeting of investments, continued monitoring and evaluation, and flexibility to address emerging issues.

### The project in numbers

- 75 farmers – the number of actual beneficiaries
- 20 hectares of Bargou peaches planted or restored
- US\$85,000 – total project cost
- Threefold increase in yield (15–20 kg/tree to 45–65 kg/tree)
- Threefold increase in price received (0.6–0.8 Dinar/kg to 1.5–2.5/kg)

### Partners

PDARI.I, Ecole supérieur de l'agriculture du Kef, Arrondissement de la production végétale

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A survey in 1998 found that only two farmers were still actively managing Bargou peach trees; elsewhere it had been largely replaced by other, introduced varieties and by other fruit trees, such as apples and pears. Farmers in the zone cultivate only small areas—between 0.25 and 0.5 hectare—and have to make the most of the land they have.

The area under Bargou peach had declined from a peak of some 350 hectares in the 1950s to less than two hectares, and even those orchards were in a very poor state. The trees were all suffering from fungal diseases, the orchards were heavily overgrown, with undergrowth competing with the trees for water and nutrients, and irrigation systems had fallen into disrepair. Farmers were getting only 15–20 kilograms of small, poor-quality fruit per tree. At 0.6–0.8 Dinar per kilogram, the returns barely covered production costs.

A review of what was known of the Bargou peach found that it had received no research or development attention for at least 30 years, and little information was available on its agronomic needs.

The project brought in technical experts from the Ecole supérieur de l'agriculture du Kef to identify possible interventions that could revive the productivity of the existing trees and to develop a program for producing replacement trees. These led to the development of packages of improved management practices, including application of fungicides and herbicides, fertilizer recommendations, and appropriate irrigation amounts and timings. The project also started a program for multiplication of the Bargou peach, taking cuttings from abandoned trees throughout the former range of the variety and grafting them onto rootstocks in a nursery. Local farmers were trained in grafting, to ensure that they would be able to continue the work when the project ended.

Applying the recommended practices on the trees of the two farmers still producing Bargou peach increased both the yields of the trees (45–65 kilograms per tree) and the quality of the fruit produced, which resulted in higher prices paid to the farmers (1.5–2.5 Dinar per kilogram), and much higher returns. This was more than sufficient to offset the increase in the production costs.

Neighboring farmers were quick to see the benefits of the improved practices and adopted the practices themselves, without direct financial support from the project (the project had paid the costs of the original trials, although the farmers provided labor as an in-kind contribution). By the time the project came to an end in 2006, 75 farmers were producing Bargou peach on more than 20 hectares of orchards, many of them having replaced other varieties and species with the Bargou peach trees.

The project has successfully rescued a valuable indigenous crop, restoring lost knowledge among both farmers and research and extension staff and improving farmers' livelihoods in this poor and underdeveloped part

of Tunisia. The increased income has allowed many farmers to send their children to school, improving their future prospects. The project also served as a catalyst for interest in the zone, with other organizations now taking a greater interest in the needs of the area. More effort is still needed to protect the gains,

including measures to maintain the prices paid for Bargou peach, such as product labeling to identify "authentic" Bargou peaches from the region, and continued provision of assistance to the farmers.

The project identified numerous other indigenous varieties in need of rescue, including Kesra figs and cherries, Maktar cherries and walnuts and Westlati Olives. Funds are needed to continue this work.



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