

NOTE

***Palmiria*: An Italian interest group for the study of date palm and other palms**

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Only two palm species occur naturally in Europe. The indigenous Mediterranean fan palm (*Chamaerops humilis*) is widespread in the Mediterranean scrub vegetation of southern Europe and North Africa. A close relative of the true date palm, the Cretan date palm (*Phoenix theophrasti*), is native to the eastern Mediterranean, occurring in southern Greece, Crete and the north coast of Turkey. Several exotic palms are grown in the warmer areas of Italy and generally in southern Europe. The true date palm (*P. dactylifera*) was introduced to Iberia sometime after the Moorish conquest began in the eighth century. Seedling date palm groves were established in coastal locations in what is now southeastern Spain, most prominently in Elche. This early introduction is represented today by the historic Palmeral de Elche, a World Heritage Site. The Elche area is Europe's only area of commercial date palm cultivation, with fruit still derived primarily from seedling palms. Elche, along with Bordighera in the Liguria coast of Italy, is a commercial source of white date palm leaves, which have a ceremonial role in Easter week celebrations in Europe. Newly emergent leaves are wrapped and protected from sunlight to block chlorophyll production.

From Portugal in the east to Turkey in the west, ornamental palm species are common in the landscape. Species of *Phoenix*, especially the Canary Islands palm (*P. canariensis*) and the date palm, are common all along the southern European shores and in botanical gardens. Since the nineteenth century, Italian scientists have been studying exotic palms and cultivating them in botanic gardens and parks; these activities have generated substantial knowledge of the palm plant family. As well, Italian agronomists have conducted research on date palm in North Africa, especially in Libya, where they have described many local varieties and determined best cultivation practices.

The tradition of palm research combined with the current interest and activities inspired the formation, in April 2014, of an Italian Interest

Group named *Palmiria*. The Group is composed of members of five Italian institutions with well-established interest in and experience with the growth and utilization of palms. The general objective of the Group is to study the systematic, environmental, ornamental, agroindustrial and food aspects of date and other palms grown in the Mediterranean Region, in order to formulate programs to promote training, research, development and dissemination of information about these important plants. Activities of the Group are envisioned also to include identification of funding sources for research and development as well as to foster international collaboration with date growing countries in North Africa and the Middle East to promote date fruit marketing within the European Union.

Recently members of the *Palmiria* Group participated in an important project in Libya focused on sustainable local date palm cultivation. This project aimed at guaranteeing the production of high quality dates by supporting the adoption of best production practices, grading standards for fruit for international markets, valorization of traditional oases management and the protection of agrobiodiversity through low environmental impact agricultural practices. Concerning valorization of date palms, the Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare (IAO) coordinated, in collaboration with the Libyan Ministry of Agriculture, the realization of a project to improve date palm cultivation in the Al Jufrah Oases, launched within the framework of an agreement between Italy and Libya aimed at strengthening and further developing relations. The Project targeted both vertical and horizontal synergies and continuity: from producer to consumer (vertical) and encouraging local producers to join together in associations for the processing and marketing of the product (horizontal). To achieve this goal the Project involved all stakeholders in the production chain, promoting and strengthening associations that manage all activities, from production to marketing. The model, taken as a reference in this process, was

the experience in Italy in the promotion of typical local products where the goal was to enhance both the product and the entire territory, providing both protection and promotion. See: www.libyan.dates.com/english/index.html.

Members of the Palmiria Group represent the five following institutions:

1. Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare. The Institute is the consultancy and technical assistance arm of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, providing support in agricultural sciences and technology in efforts to alleviate world poverty and hunger. IAO is involved with development cooperation initiatives of integrated rural development, environmental and natural resource management, measures to combat desertification and promotion of food security; it works in close consultation with the Italian Development Cooperation (DGCS). These efforts have established an extensive network of contacts and collaborations with developing country governmental and nongovernmental national and international organizations. IAO staff has gained broad technical, scientific and cultural experience and is regularly updating its work according to emerging needs and global changes (contact: battaglia@iao.florence.it)
2. Center for Studies and Research on Palms of Sanremo (CSRP). The Center has ongoing activities to promote and protect of palms as an historical, cultural and landscape heritage. It has hosted a series of palm conferences and has conducted research on the historic Bordighera date palm grove near Sanremo (contact: sanremopalme@gmail.com).
3. Department of Agri-food Production and Environmental Sciences (DISPAA), University of Florence. The Genetics section studies gene structure, function, expression and heredity in plants. It uses biometrical, statistical and numerical methods of analysis of complex traits and molecular polymorphisms to investigate the dynamics and distribution of genetic resources (contact: milvia.racchi@unifi.it).
4. Museum of Natural History, University of Florence. This institution supports scientific and museum research, promotion and dissemination of natural history information by collecting, preserving and expanding their collections. In addition to the extensive herbarium, it includes a botanical garden with a collection of about 300 palm specimens

representing 58 genera and 100 species. The Museum conducts systematic research and acclimatization studies on some 33 palm species (contact: paolo.luzzi@unifi.it)

5. Department of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Systems (GESAAF), University of Florence. The Bio systems Engineering section studies and designs tools, machines, equipment and structures for cultivation, storage and processing of agricultural products and has proven capabilities in date palm mechanization and date fruit processing, with field experiences in Iraq, Libya and Egypt, and contacts with specialized institutions in Algeria and Oman (contact: francesco.garbati@unifi.it).

The Palmiria Group has plans to establish an internet link for access to reports on Group activities and to function as a forum for the exchange of information about the date and other palms in Italy and other Mediterranean Basin countries.