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The history of loquat growing and future prospects of its commercial cultivation and marketing in Pakistan

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SUMMARY – Loquat fruit has been grown in specific areas of Pakistan where canal and spring water is abundantly available. Since it is the first fruit of the year, ripening in early April, it is very popular and sells at a premium price because no other fresh seasonal fruit is available in the market. The varieties under cultivation are indigenous and have been grown for a long time. Presently about 10,000 ha are planted with local loquat varieties producing 1,280,000 tonnes which are not of exportable quality. Loquat fruit is not imported into Pakistan. I introduced the first grafted "Tanaka variety" from Japan in 1965, which came into bearing after four years and gave excellent fruit. Presently approximately 1000 ha of Tanaka variety are bearing fruit in orchards in our Province. It is producing about 16,000 tonnes of fruit, 90% of which is consumed within the country whereas 10% is exported to Middle Eastern Countries, mainly Dubai.

Key words: Growing areas, production, varieties, fruit size, quality, propagation.

RESUME – "Historique de la culture du néflier et perspectives futures pour sa production commerciale et marketing au Pakistan". Les nèfles ont été cultivées dans des zones spécifiques du Pakistan où l'eau des canaux et les pluies de printemps la rendent disponible en abondance. Vu que c'est le premier fruit de l'année, mûrissant au début avril, il est très populaire et se vend à un prix élevé car il n'y a pas d'autres fruits frais de saison disponibles sur le marché. Les variétés utilisées sont autochtones et sont cultivées depuis longtemps. Actuellement il y a environ 10 000 ha plantés de variétés locales de nèfles produisant 1 280 000 tonnes qui ne sont pas de qualité exportable. Les nèfles ne sont pas importées au Pakistan. La première variété greffée "Tanaka" provenant du Japon avait été introduite par moi-même en 1965 ; elle est entrée en production après quatre années et a donné d'excellents fruits. Actuellement 1000 ha environ de la variété Tanaka sont entrés en production dans les vergers de notre province. Ils produisent environ 16 000 tonnes de fruits, dont 90% sont consommés dans le pays tandis que 10% sont exportés aux pays du Moyen-Orient, principalement Dubayy.

Mots-clés : Zones de culture, production, variétés, taille du fruit, qualité, propagation.

Loquat fruit has been grown in specific areas of Pakistan where canal and spring water is abundantly available. These areas in the Province of Punjab are Kallar Kahar, Chooaya Saidan Shah, Soan Valley and Hassanabdal while in North West Frontier Province these are Kohat Valley, Haripur and Peshawar Valley. These areas are located at 34 degree latitude and 75 degree longitude having annual rainfall of 480 mm (20 inches).

Since it is first fruit of the year ripening in early April therefore is very popular and sells at premium price because no other fresh seasonal fruit is available in the market. The varieties under cultivation are indigenous being grown since long. The size of fruit is very small having two to three seeds but the flesh is sweet. Since the propagation is done through seed therefore no particular variety has been named or selected. But when an horticulturist roams about in the fruit orchards in the fruiting time then a lot of trees with good size fruit can be identified for which no efforts in Pakistan has ever been made. Hence there is scope of selection of varieties with good characters i.e. big size, less no. of seeds, more flesh, good taste and prolific bearing. Presently about 10,000 ha of land is under local variety of loquat producing 1,280,000 tonnes which is not of exportable quality. Loquat fruit is not imported into Pakistan.

Unfortunately none of the government research stations have ever undertaken serious research on this unique fruit hence I started my experimentations with imported varieties and local selection in 1962. The first grafted "Tanaka" variety of Japan was introduced by me in 1965 which came into bearing after four years and gave excellent fruit. The size was quite big as compared to the local

ones, oblong in shape with approximately three seeds per fruit and good taste. I propagated this variety vegetatively by inarching method for commercial plantation. This method was tedious and expensive and lesser number of plants could be obtained because of high winds disturbing the graft union of the scion with the rootstocks. Later I tried the side graft method which proved quite successful as well as it saved us the wastage of time, arranging the potted rootstock plants, tying them for graft union and placing them finally on stools around the mother tree. Since the fruit of this variety became extremely popular throughout Pakistan, therefore nurserymen from all over my Province rushed to get budwood from me, which was freely given to them. As a result of this presently approximately 1000 ha of Tanaka variety is bearing fruit in orchards in our Province. It is producing about 16,000 tonnes of fruit, 90% of which is consumed within the country while 10% is exported to Middle Eastern Countries, i.e. mainly Dubai. In fact the demand within our country for this exotic fruit is increasing day by day so much that for a decade to come we would not have any surplus for export.

Loquat flourishes in well-drained irrigated areas of Northern part of Pakistan where certain amount of chilling is available during winter time, therefore its cultivation is growing in these particular lands which fulfills the requirement of this fruit. However chilling beyond -3°C kills its flowers during winter, but the tree is cold hardy upto -10°C , therefore this fruit is grown in the climatic zones of Pakistan where the temperature ranges between 38 to 25°C in the summer with humidity upto 75% and in winter it ranges between 20 to 3°C . The soils of these areas are sandy loam and clay loam while pH ranges between 5.0 to 8.5. The loquat is not pruned in our country while it is affected by numerous diseases i.e. *Helminthosporium* sp., *Alternaria* sp., *Biospora* sp., *Diplodia* sp., *Colletotrichum* sp., *Curculera* sp., *Phytophthora* sp., *Cytospora chrysosperma*, *Cytospora eriobotryae* and *Spiloea eriobotryae* and is also considered as host plant for fruit fly insect. Although it is not severely attacked by the insect itself but it seriously damages the peach orchards in the adjoining areas. As mentioned above the Northern part of Pakistan's irrigated lands produce commercially viable fruit while in the Southern part of Pakistan due to very high temperature in summer and non availability of sufficient chilling during the winter, the tree grows well but cannot produce commercially viable fruit.

As already mentioned above I am conducting research on loquats at my private experiment station where more than 30 varieties imported from Japan, Turkey, Morocco, Italy and Egypt are presently under observation. Most of them are two to four years old plants and expected to bear fruit in next two years. I believe there is urgent need of exchange of promising varieties of loquats between countries, which grows this exotic fruit in the World.

This fruit as I have read in literature has originated from South of China from where it was taken to Japan about 900 years ago and later found its way to Indian sub continent, Mediterranean countries and lastly to North and South America as well as to Australia. It has become a popular fruit which besides being the first seasonal fruit is also tasty and nutritious while it can be enjoyed fresh and also in canned form.

I take the opportunity of making a suggestion at this august forum that as horticulturists it is our sacred duty to give this unique and forgotten fruit its rightful place in the list of the important fruits of the World by organizing symposium/conferences for exchange of knowledge and research material between the horticulture scientists and progressive farmers. It is essential for conducting continued research for evolving early, mid and late maturing varieties so that the mankind can enjoy this fruit. We need to identify the various diseases pests and other limiting factors which are presently faced by the horticulturists round the World in producing top quality loquats fruit so that solutions to these problems could be found with joint efforts.