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Khoury W.

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Certification programmes for the sanitary improvement of stone fruit production in Lebanon

Wafa KHOURY
Faculty of Agricultural Sciences
Lebanese University
Beirut (Lebanon)

There was, until present, no certification program regulating the production of certified, virus-free or virus-tested and true to type vegetative propagative materials in Lebanon. Neither was there legislation organising the fruit tree nursery business in the country, thus allowing a nursery to produce and sell seedlings without being subjected to any legal control on either the sanitary quality or the varietal trueness of the trees being produced.

The Lebanese pome and stone fruit nurseries are large enough to supply most of the growers in Lebanon and neighbouring countries of the Region with various types of fruit trees. Whereas, the nurseries of the Bekaa plains supply stone fruit trees to commercial orchards in the Bekaa, Mount Lebanon, specially the Chouf area, and to a limited extent the South region. Growers in North Lebanon get their trees from nurseries in their own area. Still, a lot of materials are exchanged among the nurseries in the various regions of the country and between the nurseries within a region (Syria, Jordan).

A co-operative project between the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences-Lebanese University (FAS/LU), the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute (IAM-B), and the University of Bari, Italy was initiated in 1994 for the establishment of a certification program in Lebanon. This project was the first attempt to locally produce, conserve, and utilise certified propagative material that was virus-free or virus-tested and true-to-type. It stressed, at an initial stage, the development of certified stone fruit, citrus, and local grapevine varieties, with a possible expansion to other fruit tree crops and vegetables once the system was functioning. The project expanded to involve the Lebanese Agricultural Research Institute (IRAL) as an essential partner in the certification scheme.

Realising the importance of the private initiative in a country as Lebanon and the need for serious co-operation among institutions for the success of any certification scheme, there were continuous discussions with the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture, the research and educational institutions, the growers as well as the private agricultural business sector to increase their awareness on the urgent need for the serious implementation of quarantine regulations and certification protocols for the improvement of the agricultural sector in Lebanon.

The first stage of the certification program in Lebanon was the establishment of a virology diagnostic laboratory at the FAS/LU with capacity to undertake the basic pathological and serological tests. With the help of this laboratory, several surveys were undertaken for the evaluation of the sanitary status of the stone fruits, grapes, and citrus orchards, and nurseries. The biological indexing needed, however, was in each case performed in the glasshouses of the IAM-B in Italy. Several clones of local stone fruits were collected, tested and being sanitised at the IAM-B facilities. These will be used in the coming years as basic material in Lebanon for the initial stages of the certification program.

The most important stage within the certification scheme was the establishment of a proper legislation to be adopted by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Lebanese government. This legislation set the actual regulations to be implemented in Lebanon, identified institutions involved in the program, described methodology and type of control undertaken on the certified material at the conservatory, established mother blocks, and involved public or private nurseries. These technical and legislative protocols, adapted to the Lebanese situation and needs, were prepared based on the EPPO proposals and the schemes discussed by the country representatives in each of the Mediterranean Network for Virus Disease Assessment and Sanitation of Stone Fruit Trees (MNFT) and the Mediterranean Network for Citrus Certification (MNCC). At present, these protocols are being studied by the local authorities.

Co-operation with the Lebanese Agricultural Research Institute (IRAL) was strengthened. The IRAL has allocated a large area within the premises of its Station at Tel Amara, Bekaa, to be used in the coming years as a mother block for local and foreign grapevine and stone fruit cultivars. A large orchard, containing over 72 stone fruit varieties and 11 grapevine varieties, was established at Tel Amara to be used: (i) as a demonstration plot for the growers, (ii) for nurserymen to observe and compare the performance of the different varieties, and (iii) for the use of new production techniques, other than those commonly practised in the area. Research and technical personnel of IRAL will be allocated specially to work in the certification project, and collaborate with the researchers at the FAS/LU and with farmers and nurserymen in the field.

Although several stages in the initiation of a certification scheme in Lebanon were achieved, the program is new and will require much efforts before it can effectively function.

The major steps still needed include:

- adoption and implementation of the certification legislation by the official administration;
- establishment of further infrastructure including controlled glasshouses for biological indexing, insect-proof screenhouses for the conservation of the satiated or tested material and sanitation facilities for candidate clones;
- funds and personnel allocation from the concerned institutions to allow for the sustainability of the certification program;
- training of the scientific and technical human resources working within this certification program;
- providing continuous workshops and seminars for growers, nurserymen and administrators to improve their awareness on the importance of the utilisation of certified plant material.