

Israel's Treasure Is The Negev



Israeli agronomist Yoel DeMalach demonstrates the fine quality of vegetables produced through the use of revolutionary farming techniques at Ramat Hanegev, a Jewish National Fund-supported agricultural station in Israel's Negev desert.

By Yehonathan Tommer
JNF NEWS BUREAU

BEERSHEBA, THE NEGEV — Like Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, Israeli agronomist Yoel DeMalach is convinced that Israel's farming future is in the Negev. He has solid grounds for this belief: 40 years of solid pioneering at Kibbutz Revivim, which he helped to establish in 1943 with 30 friends from his native Florence, Italy. A dusty outpost south of Beersheba at the time, the fact that Revivim is today a leading agricultural cooperative in the desolate Negev region is dramatic tribute to the community's farming ingenuity.

At Ramat Hanegev, a Jewish National Fund-supported research and experimental agricultural station near Revivim, the silver-haired DeMalach and a team of researchers and technicians have developed food crops irrigated by saline water and treated sewage. The Jewish National Fund reclaimed the surrounding sand dunes and is currently raising funds to sponsor land research and development projects there.

"Our tasks are to advise farmers establishing new kibbutzim in the Negev and to help veteran kibbutzim choose suitable crops," says DeMalach.

"We are growing tomatoes, grapes, cotton, asparagus and peanuts — we never dreamed we could grow these crops on sand dunes with salty water for irrigation."

According to DeMalach the idea that the Negev is dry is not quite true. "After 15 years of oil drilling," he says, "it's known for certain that the Central Negev virtually floats on an underground ocean of water. It's all artesian bore water, 3000 feet below the surface and mostly brackish — with salt concentrations ranging from as low as 500 to as high as 2,400 milligrams per cubic meter. You can't drink it, but it's fine for irrigation."

The key to Ramat Hanegev's success is adapting plants to tolerate salt water. DeMalach believes the entire Negev can one day become one vast farming region.

"Don't forget," he points out, "that in the Arava we've been farming with brackish water for several years, with salinity at least as high as in the Negev."

Over 20 agricultural villages — kibbutzim and moshavim stretching along the Arava Valley between the Dead Sea and Eilat — are using advanced techniques, such as drip irrigation. Israeli farmers there have doubled and even tripled world records for crop yields.

Dreams of making the desert bloom suffered a

Controversial Karp Report Published

JERUSALEM (WNS) — The report by Deputy Attorney General Yehudit Karp citing shortcomings in the maintenance of law and

order in the administered territories came under sharp attack by two of the group's critics in the report — the settlers and the police.

Representatives of the settlers in Judaea and Samaria charged in a statement that the Karp report was "full of lies" and that most of the cases cited in it's dealing with Jewish vigilantism were based on unreliable information, obtained primarily from one former police officer who had served in the

severe setback ten years ago, when the energy crisis rendered large-scale water desalination economically unfeasible. In recent years, therefore, Israel has been investing heavily in developing even more effective methods of cultivating cash crops in saline, sandy soil irrigated with brackish water or treated sewage. Soil experts, plant geneticists and agronomists from such prestigious institutions as Ben Gurion University and the Volcani Institute have joined the JNF in this effort.

"Drip irrigation — an Israeli invention — is a proven method of effectively washing salts from the soil, DeMalach says. "It is keeping the salt dissolved. Also, the water gets only to the roots of the plants and prevents salt crusts from forming on the leaves."

DeMalach is still searching for ways to cut costs. Next year he plans to introduce underground drip irrigation on a model developed by the Dutch. "With irrigation lines some 10 to 15 inches underground loss of water through evaporation can be reduced to almost nothing," he predicts.

DeMalach still has to find a way to prevent roots from ripping through the plastic piping and choking outlet valves. "We've almost solved this problem," he says. A non-poisonous inhibiting powder is being tested by industrial chemists in Beersheba and, when fully developed, it will be sprinkled around the irrigation lines to protect them."

The Ramat Hanegev crops are irrigated with sweet and brackish water alternately and then tested for comparative growth, diseases, plant resilience and adaptability.

Paradoxically, the fruits and vegetables grown with brackish water are actually sweeter and tastier. "This is because produce grown with salty water is fleshier, and their juice and sugars more concentrated," DeMalach explains. "This is particularly true of tomatoes and melons which are more solid and have better flavor."

The Negev experimental station is currently testing some 25 different strains of melons and a cluster variety of tomatoes called "Tamar," — the Hebrew for date. Among some of the more exotic plants being tested this year is a tropical fruit called Pijoa, as well as the American buffalo gourd which will be ground into industrial starch by a Beersheba firm.

In the Negev today, David Ben-Gurion's prophecy lives.

territories. The settlers took issue with the report's assertion that tensions in the West Bank were heightened by Jewish settlers. The settlers charge that the Arab population is responsible for friction between Arabs and Jews.

Meanwhile, Commissioner Yehoshua Caspi, the head of the

Southern command, said that the proportion of charges against 15 of the 70 cases cited in the report was not less than the proportion of cases moved for prosecution in Israel proper. He added however that there were not enough police to handle work in the territories.

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