



Production of Organic Apricot in Armenia A New Direction

Background

Nowadays people all over the world are concerned with healthy lifestyle and habits among which nutrition is an important element. Therefore, production of natural and organic food is increasing vigorously worldwide.

Armenia is a novice country in organic agriculture. Organic farming methods were introduced to our country just a few years ago with the first hectares of newly planted apricot orchards. Armenia has limited land resources for large commodity scale agricultural production, and therefore producing high value organic apricot will certainly add competitiveness in niche markets.

The first attempt was made by Shen NGO. For pioneering in this difficult method, virgin lands of Aragatsotn region were chosen where hardly any agricultural production had taken place since decades. The soil there was clean but very poor and too rocky, with a natural cement layer as deep as one meter below the surface. In 2001, thanks to the support of international donors Shen NGO ameliorated the land and with the help of the farmers of five neighboring villages established an orchard of 38 ha which is being cultivated according of organic methods.

Since then the acreage of organically cultivated orchards established by Shen has increased: 70 ha new orchard appeared in the farthest reserve lands of Armavir region, near village Argina, turning the unattractive landscape into an oasis.





Prerequisites

Armenia has favorable natural conditions for growing organic apricot. Particularly, no industrial enterprises and persistent pollutants are there at higher elevations, where most of the organic production is located. The soil and water is clean, the humidity is low, which reduces the propagation of diseases. The necessity for traditional spring sprayings that are applied in conventional farming, can be eliminated thanks to application of nature friendly sustainable techniques. In case of necessity bio-preparations are applied.

Environmental concerns, food safety and nature friendly farming methods are obtaining top importance on policy level. Corresponding legal framework is being developed. Particularly, a Draft Law on Organic Agriculture developed by the Governemnt of Armenia and is currently being deliberated in the National Assembly. It will provide a legitimate basis of action for Armenian framers, producers and handlers.

The Ministry of Agriculture is supporting a number of other initiatives directed towards development of organic farming in Armenia

The produce

The organically cultivated orchards are still young and are just beginning to produce. But in a few years, once the trees are 10 -15 years old, the yields will reach 1500 -2000 tons. As an integrated part of the project, Shen has constructed solar drying facilities near two orchards so that the fresh produce can be processed for higher value. These facilities produce dried apricot following organic rules.

The soil in the orchards is fertilized by composted manure. Alfalfa is planted to enrich soil with nitrogen. Application of nature-friendly agricultural techniques reduce pest and disease risks. However climatic conditions remain a potential threat. In order to prevent the negative consequences of late frosts, during spring of 2007 the orchards were smoked by burning straw during several nights when the weather forecast was critical. This is a method used by our ancestors during many centuries. However, Shen intends to obtain special heaters that use liquid gas and have higher efficiency.





Extension and Certification

The largest support for organic agriculture is provided by Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and EPER (Switzerland) implemented by Shen NGO. In the framework of Shen NGO's Organic Farming Development Project, an extension service was established.

Young and open-minded people with agricultural background and extension experience were selected who passed a series of trainings specifically in organic agriculture methods. The project envisions continuous training for these specialists delivered by invited consultants as well as study and exchange abroad.

The importance of organic extension service is difficult to overestimate. Without support and extension hardly any farmer would be able pass route from conventional to certified organic farming.

In the frame of the project organic inspection and certification service was created as well which now is an independent company – Ecoglobe – and operates according to internationally recognized standards.



Social and Environmental Dimension

Although organic apricot growing is business, it also has social dimension. Organic fruit growing and processing is seen as a way of increasing farmer's income and easing access to markets. As cultivating organic orchards was a new kind of activity, farmers from target communities were provided training on organic requirements and methods. Encouraged by the success of the orchards farmed by Shen's target communities, as well as the created infrastructure of roads, canals and electricity supply, individual farmers of the neighborhood too establish their own orchards on barren lands and cultivate them with ecologically friendly methods. Training and extension is available for such farmers as well with the aim of fully converting them into organic in near future. It is expected that in a course of several years about 500 ha of orchards – old and new - will turn organic.

Training and environmental education is provided to rural schoolchildren as well. Apart from classroom sessions, children gain hands-on practice by growing fruit trees according organic methods in their school yards. These children are regarded as future organic farmers who will increase the production of this high value produce.





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