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## Saving date palms

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A FIVE-YEAR project that could save Bahrain's dwindling date palms has been launched across the GCC. The plan aims to develop production across the region through research and improved technology.

It is being spearheaded by the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), which is based in Dubai, and should improve the yield and quality of date palms.

GCC countries currently produce around 1.9 million tonnes of date fruit per year, which is 28pc of global date production, according to 2003 figures from the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO).

Bahrain was once known as Umm Al Million Nakhle (Mother of a Million Palms), but the FAO said it now accounts for just 0.2pc of global date production with around 16,506 tonnes per year, while Saudi Arabia contributes 830,000 tonnes a year.

ICARDA reports that Bahrain's palms are being destroyed at an alarming rate due to extremely high salinity levels in the water and a lack of necessary expertise to improve date palm production.

"There has been a lot of good work done in Bahrain, but further technical help is needed," ICARDA Arabian Peninsula regional programme co-ordinator Ahmed Moustafa told the GDN.

"At the moment, date exports coming out of Bahrain are of very low quality.

"The amount of date fruit produced is also not as high as it could potentially be.

"Other problems include poor farm management, a lack of control over pests and diseases, problems with processing and marketing and insufficient research and development activities."

However, under the guidance of ICARDA's programme he said many of the problems hindering date palm production in Bahrain would be resolved.

"There has been very little organised research on date palms in this region," he said.

"We want to get the world's best experts together so that we can educate regional officials."

The programme will involve extensive research on aspects of date palm production such as the influence of different environments, watering and fertilisation regimes on fruit production, as well as the different stages of tree growth and fruit production.

Another topic under research will be the actual water requirements of date palms, which as yet is largely unknown.

"Date palm farmers are often not aware of the detrimental effect of deficit irrigation," said Mr Moustafa.

"We hope to introduce new and more effective technologies for water management in order to improve the efficiency and productivity of date palm farms."

Other projects are the evaluation and selection of male palms to gain further pollination information and teaching better management techniques - particularly to help combat the current high post-harvest losses.

Also important to harvest management is the possibility of harvest mechanisation and disease control.

"The detection of diseases affecting the date palms is a difficult process and this needs work," said Mr Moustafa.

"It's also important that we test biological disease control strategies which would make a huge difference to date palm production."

ICARDA also aims to develop techniques to "fingerprint" the different varieties of date palm, which are currently very difficult to distinguish.

It hopes to create a gene map of the date palms, which would be a major breakthrough for date palm production.

"Once we have achieved this, we can begin to develop new varieties through genetic engineering," said Mr Moustafa.

"These hybrids will have higher yields, be of higher quality and be more resistant to disease and drought - which is especially important in this region."

The date palm has adapted to areas with long dry summers and mild winters and has a unique ability to thrive in arid desert regions with high temperatures and underground water close to the surface.

It can also tolerate high levels of salinity, making the Gulf region perfect for date palm production.

Dates are not only considered as high value confectionery worldwide, but are also considered to be the most important subsistence crops in the desert areas.

"Dates are extremely important to the Gulf region," said Mr Moustafa.

"Not only are they extremely nutritious, but they are an important part of the Gulf's heritage and history.

"They are one of the oldest fruit trees in the Arabian Peninsula and have played a key role in the life of its people."

A regional ICARDA training course, entitled Date Palm Development in the Arabian Peninsula was held last month and was attended by Agriculture Ministry officials from throughout the Gulf.

The two-week course discussed key issues related to date palm development and Mr Moustafa stressed the importance of such meetings.

"The production of date palms is one of our most important projects and it is essential that the utmost input goes into it," he said.