

NUTS AND BOLTS OF US PISTACHIOS

Pistachio trees have grown in the Middle East for thousands of years. Pistachios are mentioned in the Old Testament (Genesis 43:11). Evidence from excavations has shown that tribes in the Near East gathered pistachios as far back as 20,000 BC. Legend has it that pistachios were a favorite of the Queen of Sheba, who demanded all her land's production for herself and her court.

Prior to 1976, all pistachios consumed in the US were from the Middle East. American importers dyed the shells red to disguise staining caused by antiquated harvesting and processing methods.

In 1976, with state-of-the-art harvesting and processing methods, US pistachios entered the market with clean, naturally tan shells. A very small percentage of US pistachios are still dyed red to meet the demand of those consumers who prefer the colorful shell. It didn't take long for the US to become the #2 producer in the world, behind Iran that has been producing pistachios for hundreds of years.

WHEN DID US PISTACHIO PRODUCTION BEGIN?

The first commercial crop of US pistachios was produced in California in 1976 and totaled 1.5 million pounds. By comparison, in 2007, a record crop of over 400 million pounds was produced.

HOW ARE PISTACHIO TREES POLINATED?

It takes both a male and female pistachio tree to produce edible nuts. No bees need apply for work on this tree crop as pistachios are pollinated by wind.

HOW ARE PISTACHIOS HARVESTED?

Pistachios grow on trees in grape-like clusters. When it comes time to harvest, machines clasp the tree trunk and give it a hearty shake (approximately 15 seconds per tree). The pistachios fall into a bin without ever touching the ground, and then they are whisked off to the processing plant for hulling, sorting and drying.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE FOR A TREE TO PRODUCE?

It takes at least six years for a pistachio tree to produce a commercial-size crop. Pistachio trees reach full bearing when they are 7-10 years old. And they are alternate bearing, which means one year the trees will produce a large crop and the next year they will produce a small crop.

WHY ARE PISTACHIOS GREEN?

Pistachio kernels get their green color from chlorophyll, the same pigment that makes leaves green.

HOW ARE PISTACHIO SHELLS OPENED?

As the pistachio kernel grows on the tree, it naturally expands within the shell until it splits open. Closed shells usually contain immature kernels and should be discarded. Slightly split shells can be opened by wedging one half of the shell from an already-opened pistachio into the split and turn it until you can retrieve the kernel.

HOW TO STORE PISTACHIOS

Pistachios draw moisture from the air, which causes them to eventually lose their crunch? To maintain freshness, store them in an airtight container in the refrigerator. Pistachios will maintain their freshness in the freezer for at least a year.