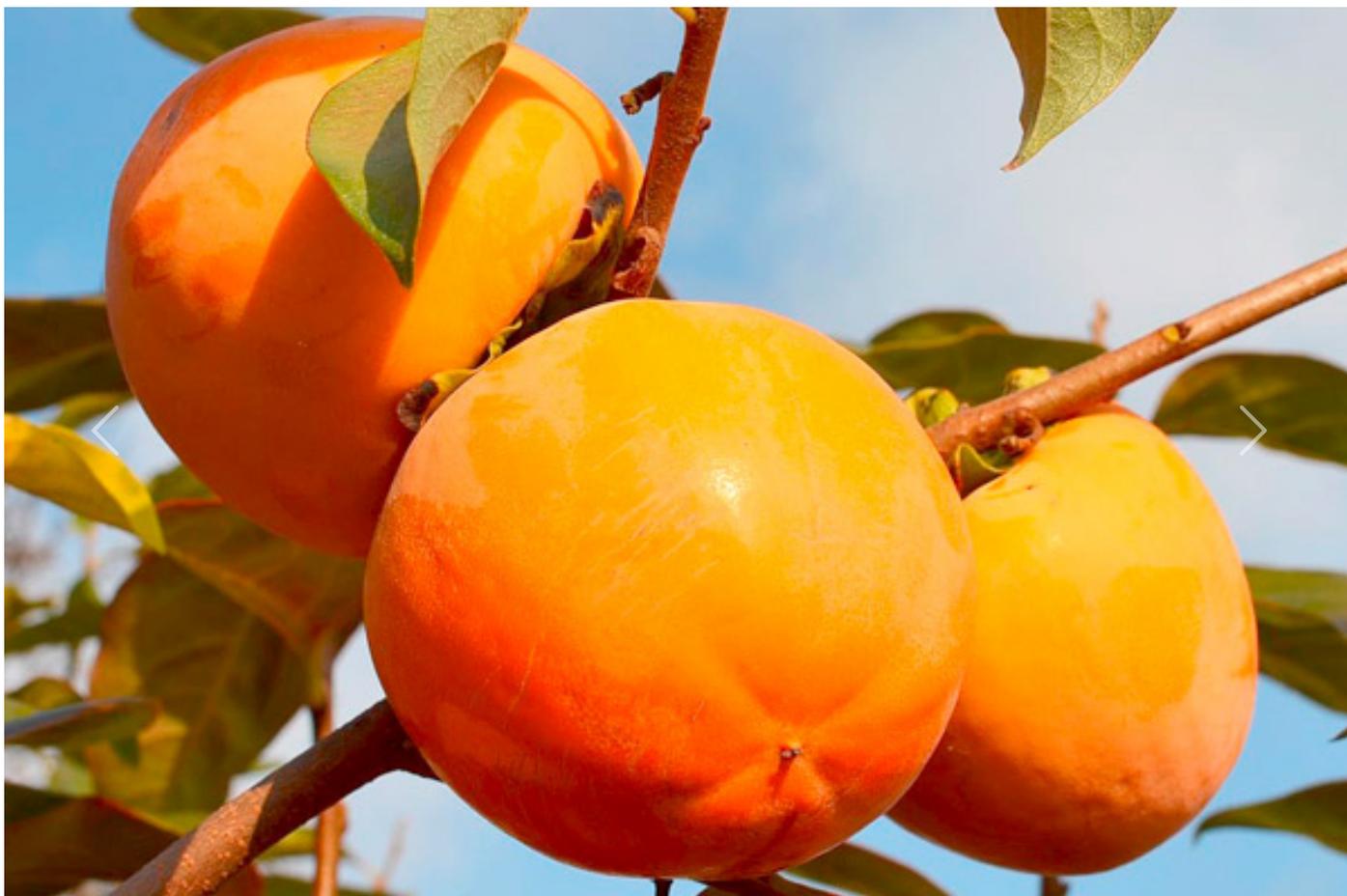


Paradise garden near Ahtopol

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In 2020 it was exactly 35 years since the largest persimmon orchard in Bulgaria was planted in the vicinity of the town of Ahtopol.

The first records of the cultivation and breeding of persimmon (*Diospyros kaki*) come from the Far East – Japan and China.

The origin of the saplings used in the orchard near Ahtopol, however, is Black Sea, from the Crimean Peninsula. The young trees were initially grown in the renowned Nikitsky Botanical Garden*, in the vicinity of Yalta.

A total of 240 cultivated saplings, about one and a half metres high, were delivered.

The selection of the saplings, the planting in the spring of 1985 and their subsequent cultivation in the orchard were the work and responsibility of a research team at the Experimental Station for Southern Crops in the town of Michurin (now Tsarevo), which is a division of the Agricultural Academy.

Until that time persimmon as a fruit was not very well known in Bulgaria and its demand was limited.

The main scientific task was: to what extent the plantation would be able to acclimatize here, on the Southern Black Sea Coast, and bear fruit. Until then individual persimmon trees had been grown singly in house yards, in sheltered places protected from the north-eastern wind.

The “birth” or, more precisely, the “planting date” of the largest persimmon plantation in Bulgaria was at the beginning of April 1985. The unique orchard, with an area of 60 decares, is located in the land of the town of Ahtopol: close to the sea, in the Varvarsko locality, immediately above Dolphin campsite and above the road from Tsarevo to Ahtopol.

There are five varieties in the orchard near Ahtopol: *Hiro Tanenashi*, *Hyakume*, *Hachiya*, *Costata*, *Zenji Maru*.

The young persimmon trees were planted in a 5 by 5 metre spacing scheme: the rows are five metres apart from each other, and the distance between trees within the row is also five metres. The establishment of the saplings proved successful and in the following year the entire 60-decare orchard was fenced with a permanent fence of concrete posts and galvanized wire mesh. Security guards were appointed to protect this orchard and several other orchards with permanent crops of the Experimental Station for Southern Crops in the vicinity of Ahtopol.

Individual trees started to set fruit as early as the second year, and in the third year all the young persimmon trees in the orchard near Ahtopol were already bearing their first fruits. In the following decade fruiting naturally increased.

All common agrotechnical practices for orchards began to be applied in the Ahtopol persimmon orchard: crown pruning, spraying, fertilization, weeding. The distance between the rows allows mechanized cultivation, including with tractors.

The produce from the orchard was marketed in Burgas and the larger towns.

From one decare of persimmon orchard under normal conditions it is possible to obtain about one and a half tonnes of fruit. Under favourable conditions and with trees at maximum fruiting age (about seven to eight years

old) yields can exceed 2 tonnes of fruit. There are Russian reports of an annual yield of 200–250 kg from a single tree.

To this day the experimental persimmon orchard near Ahtopol remains the largest in Bulgaria. In our country this experiment, on such a production scale, has not been continued anywhere else. Even today persimmon orchards in Bulgaria are much more modest in size and do not exceed one or two decares.

After the political changes in 1989, increasingly complex times gradually came for the orchard. By the late 1990s, a total of three properties, each eight decares in size, were restored to private owners in the very heart of the persimmon block. Subsequently, the fence that had protected the orchard as a single production unit was looted and destroyed.

The last comprehensive tractor cultivation of the persimmon orchard was carried out in 2002. Despite the changes that had occurred, related to the restoration of private ownership over almost half of the orchard, the cultivation was performed over the entire area of the plantation,

so that this unique Bulgarian agronomic experiment, valuable from a scientific point of view, could be preserved.

The persimmon orchard near Ahtopol has long since become an emblematic and recognizable topos and is one of the calling cards of the Southern Black Sea Coast.

Notes:

* The Nikitsky Botanical Garden (Никитский ботанический сад) is located on the Crimean Peninsula, near the Black Sea resort of Yalta. The botanical garden was founded in 1812 and is one of the oldest research institutions in the then Russian Empire. From the very first years of its existence, the botanical garden has specialized in the introduction, acclimatization, breeding and wide dissemination of southern fruit, ornamental, decorative, new industrial, medicinal and other useful plants.

Characteristics of the varieties used in the orchard near Ahtopol

- Hiro Tanenashi (with non-astringent fruits, they do not require storage for astringency removal, the fruit itself is flat, four-ribbed)
- Hyakume (with large to very large fruits, with corky concentric circles on the lower part of the fruit)
- Hachiya (with large to very large fruits, yellow-orange in colour)

- Costata (the most winter-hardy variety, with medium-sized fruits, conical, with an intense red-orange colour; the leaves are leathery and glossy)
- Zenji Maru (only 5–6 trees are planted near Ahtopol, with orange-yellow, medium-sized fruits).

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