

INDIA

# India targets US market

India has set its sights on the US for pomegranate exports, as the South Asian country continues to invest in new plantings and post-harvest technology

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**India is targeting the US as a potential new market for its pomegranates, as part of its bid to become the world's leading pomegranate supplier.**

The Indian government is understood to have already conducted a Pest Risk Analysis for USDA clearance, and exporters anticipate market access "soon".

"The US seems to be the most high-potential market for Indian pomegranates," says Kaushal Khakhar CEO of leading pomegranate distributor Kay Bee Exports. "There is a likelihood that the fruit might get access soon."

India, which ranks as the world's top pomegranate producer in volume terms with annual production of around 500,000 tonnes, has seen its pomegranate sales double year-on-year in the last five years as domestic and export demand soared in the wake of widely-publicised health claims.

Pomegranates were dubbed a "superfruit" after Israeli scientific research confirmed they a rich source of vitamin C, folic acid, potassium, polyphenols and antioxidants, which can help decrease the risk of heart disease and cancer.

The news sparked a consumer frenzy the world over, and saw markets developing in countries where the fruit had been long overlooked.

With limited global supply available, pomegranate prices skyrocketed and have remained high ever since.

Indian growers in particular have benefited from the huge disparity in world pomegranate supply and demand, since their low production costs and year-round yields allow them to reap very high returns.

As a result, they – encouraged by government incentives – are rapidly increasing their pomegranate acreage, at a rate of 30-40 per cent a year, some say.

Last year, Indian pomegranate acreage was pegged at 63,000ha, with key producer regions located in the state of Karnataka in the south, and Maharashtra in the west. New plantations are springing up in northern and central regions too.

Despite the dramatic rise in acreage, national production this year is forecast to rise just 10 per cent above last season



Kaushal Khakhar, CEO of Kay Bee Exports, says India is poised to become the world's top supplier

due to a bacterial blight disease that has struck orchards across India, according to Mr Khakhar, whose company is scaling up the production area under its control. Growing conditions have been excellent over the last few months, though, with optimal rain, which augurs well for the fruit over coming winter season, he says.

Bhagwa is the primary variety exported to India's core markets in the Middle East and Europe. Exports to the former began some 20 years ago, while shipments to the EU started within the last decade.

Indian pomegranate sales to Europe, while still strong last year, are considered by some to be slowing down, as consumer demand shifts away from whole fruits to processed variants.

Local Indian demand is in rude health, however, as media coverage and the advent of modern retailing continue to drive up consumption.

"I expect pomegranate consumption in India to be on the rise over the coming years," says Mr Khakhar.

India's agricultural authorities are all for boosting the country's pomegranate business – domestic and abroad. The government offers incentives to farmers to increase pomegranate acreage, Mr Khakhar explains. And the state, as well as exporters, is investing in the

construction of pomegranate coldstores. In addition, the government is planning to implement an export-quality monitoring system, identical to the one in place for grapes, by the end of this year.

Export firms are also examining ways to boost pomegranate shelf life. Kay Bee, one of very few companies with integrated pomegranate production, says it is trialing several post-harvest methods.

"We have been one of the first companies to use MAP bags for better shelf life," says Mr Khakhar. "Indian pomegranates tend to shrivel quickly on the shelf because of the thinner rind thickness. We are using several innovative technologies to maintain the fresh appeal of the fruit on the shelf."

Indian pomegranate exporters are collectively trying to increase sales worldwide, with Kay Bee at the forefront of global marketing efforts, he adds.

"India is the only country with a year-round supply of pomegranates," says Mr Khakhar. "The varied agro-climatic conditions of India allow continuous production. The soil type, farming experience and expertise, and the weather all lend themselves to top-quality fruit cultivation," he adds.

"India is poised to become a leading pomegranate supplier for the world." ■