

Pistachio nut

The pistachio nut is the seed fruit of the tree *Pistacia vera*, native to Persia. The genus *pistacia* contributes more than just their nuts for mankind. It also includes trees which produce mastic used in adhesives and varnishes, the terebinth tree, from which turpentine used to be obtained, and trees that produce a hard wood, red in colour and very much valued in cabinet making. They are all very attractive trees, especially in the autumn with their beautiful foliage.



Pistachio tree is actually a native of the desert; it thrives in stony, poor soil with long hot summers and little or no rainfall as it does not tolerate humidity. It is said that the *pistacia* genus can live for centuries with very little care. Apparently, Iran has a 700-year-old pistachio tree still living! Pistachio nuts grow in grape-like clusters, each nut encased in an outer skin. When the nut ripens, the outer skin turns a beautiful purplish pink with splashes of green. When it is ready for harvest, usually in late summer or early autumn, the shell splits, revealing the beautiful emerald colour of the inside nut.

Along with almonds, pistachios are mentioned in the Bible: “If it must be, then do this: put some of the products of the land in your bags and take them down to the man as gifts ... a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and ...” (Genesis 43:11). It was recorded that the Queen of Sheba believed pistachios were a powerful aphrodisiac; she ordered the best trees grown in Assyria to be used exclusively for her royal guests. In the Middle East, there was – and still is – a tradition that lovers meet on a moonlit night, under a beautiful grove of pistachio trees in late summer to listen to the pistachio shells bursting open – a condition which is called *khandan* (laughing) in Iran – in hope that good fortune and blessings will befall them.

Pistachio trees were introduced into Europe in the 1st century AD by the Romans. The nuts travelled well throughout the Mediterranean, spreading to China via the Silk Road. It takes five to eight years for a tree to start producing nuts and production is at its best when the tree is fully mature, between 15 to 20 years of age. Generally, a good crop is expected every alternate year. The kernel is unique among other nuts in being green, not just the outside, but all the way through. Colour and flavour are closely related. Some of the nuts are vibrant green, some more yellow than green, and some ivory, but the dark green ones are the most prized.

Pistachio is truly a delicacy with its unique flavour and colour. It is delicious eaten roasted and salted as a dessert nut. In cooking, it is used as a garnish and decoration, both in sweet and savoury dishes. It features in some of the finest pilaf dishes and looks good cracked in savoury biscuits. Brawns and pâté with pistachios are usually served sliced so that the nuts appear as attractive green slivers. Pistachio ice cream, if made with genuine nuts, is of a beautiful emerald colour and exquisite taste – unfortunately it is very costly. Most of the commercial pistachio ice creams are artificially coloured and flavoured. The delightful pistachio also features well in classic desserts, such as nougat and baklava.

Pistachio nuts were once a treasured delicacy among royals, the rich and the famous. Nowadays, they are more affordable, they are appreciated for their good look and good flavour as well as their nutritional benefits. Pistachios are a good source of copper, phosphorus, potassium, magnesium, and vitamin B6. The nuts contain some 30 vitamins, minerals, and phyto-nutrients. These nuts are the richest source of phytosterols – particularly beta-sitosterol and campesterol – among tree nuts, which means they are good for lowering cholesterol. Like most other nuts, pistachio oil is monounsaturated and cholesterol-free. However, we’d better watch out for that yummy classic dessert baklava, its delicious pistachio filling is wrapped in layers and layers of buttered filo pastry and bathed in sweet syrup!

Meanwhile, let’s enjoy quite a few non ‘nut bearing’ pistachio trees adorning our gardens and our mountains street-scape, especially in the autumn, when their foliage is truly a feast to the eyes.

