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The Role of the Oman Botanic Garden in Conserving Oman's Agriculture Environment

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Oman's location at the southeastern end of the Arabian Peninsula makes it a centre of agricultural diversity. Although based in a notably dry zone with an average rainfall of 100 mm/year, it still maintains a high concentration of very important plant species. Oman has more than 1400 native species, which makes up about 1% of the world's flora. A majority of these species are used by Omani people presenting a vitally important resource for human food security. Through the centuries, Omani traders had enriched the country's agriculture by introducing different economic crops from different parts of the world. They introduced sugarcane, mango, banana and various other crops. One of the most popular products, besides dates, is the Omani lime. Throughout the years, Oman was one of the largest exporters of lime but, unfortunately, due to an outbreak of the witch's broom plant disease, the number of exports significantly declined in recent years.

According to the latest published data, Oman possesses around 198 landrace crops. These figures are expected to increase due to advancements in research, data collection, and identification of plants and crop varieties. The present diversity of landraces of crops is attributed to the historical trade between Oman and different parts of the world. Traders imported many seeds, which then were cultivated on different oases systems throughout Oman.

Additionally, the diversity of Oman's geography and hence climatic conditions contributed to its diversity of crops. For example, some crops, such as coconut and papaya, are widely cultivated in Dhofar and nowhere else in Oman due to the climate they require. Due to its unique climate, the season of monsoon, and its rich soil, Dhofar is considered the food basket of Oman. Many tropical crops can be cultivated here and supplied to the rest of the country.

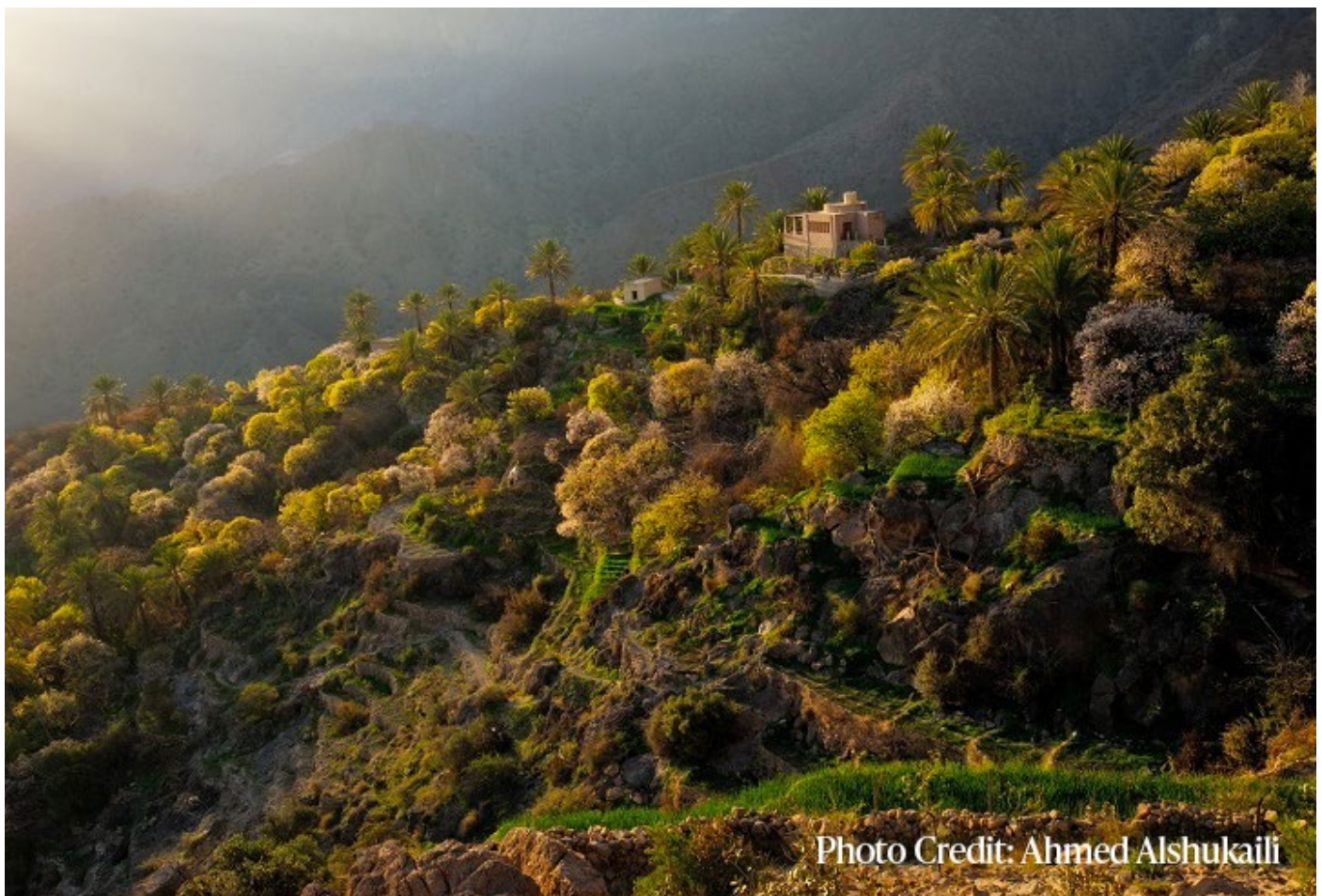


Photo Credit: Ahmed Alshukaili

It has been estimated that crops such as wheat, barley, date palms and beans were introduced to Oman earlier than 3,000 BC. A major percentage of Oman's population greatly relies on agriculture, whether as farmers or consumers. They have been growing different kinds of crop trees like pomegranate, walnut, apricots and roses on higher altitude, as well as other annual crops like onions, garlic, wheat and barley.

The Oman Botanic Garden (OBG), currently under construction, will be a brand new iconic botanic garden in the Sultanate. Since its establishment by a Royal Decree in 2006, the OBG has been committed to conserving Oman's botanical heritage and culture, including the conservation of economically important plants. All plant species have been collected and well-documented in what is considered the biggest documented collection of Arabian plants worldwide.

The garden will showcase historically cultivated crops and the traditional uses of plants in Oman. For instance, date palms are widely cultivated all over Oman. We could say it is a tree of national importance, so OBG plans to include a representation of ten major varieties of date palms in an outdoor terrace. A dedicated display will showcase all kinds of traditions associated with the date palms and how Omanis have used them for food and other purposes. In addition to that, the garden will be a very effective tool for education for all people. This will be achieved by using interpretation tools for all visitor that show the high value of Oman's diverse agriculture, including its native species and cultivated crops. The botanic garden aims to create the sort of link that has been missing between the new generation and its natural environment.



However, Oman's agricultural wealth is not limited to crops but includes the traditional methods that are still in use by Omanis to grow plants as food, medicine or fodder. Documentation of these practices has been passed through many generations and their association with agriculture has been the main focus of the OBG since its beginning. The documentation includes, but is not limited to, a record of the tools used, their weights and measurements, as well as their local names from all over the Sultanate. The OBG further documents, discusses and offers solutions to the threats and challenges faced by these traditional practices. A dedicated team at OBG, which previously covered Oman north to south, actively documents all the knowledge associated with cultivating and planting diverse crops.

This is being done not only to keep records of this knowledge but to bring captivating stories to the public who will be visiting the garden. Through these stories, the public will appreciate the agricultural practices and the heritage associated with them.

Oman Botanic Garden, like other international botanic gardens, has a significant responsibility in helping to ensure global food security by expanding its collection to include crops in addition to wild plants. The OBG collected the traditional landraces germplasm as seeds and preserves them in its seed bank to later grow them in the garden's terraces. This will help to preserve the genetic diversity of those crops, allowing them to adapt to changing conditions and build resilience to stress.

The Oman Botanic Garden's actions are significantly contributing to the achievement of the second sustainable development goal revolving around food security. This is achieved, for example, through the conservation of crop wild relatives and other plant species important for food security at the local level. Additionally, it is attained by raising the awareness of the importance of agrobiodiversity and its conservation needs through engaging communication and exciting displays.

In conclusion, the OBG aims to become an institution that educates people on the importance of plants—how necessary they are for our well-being. It promotes agriculture to the young generations as being cool and saving the world. It further aims to act as a hub for all the knowledge that had been lost by the new generation, by creating a link between the new generation and the natural environment. This includes informing them about all the natural heritage related to Oman, and how knowledge of it will contribute to saving our environment.