



Palestine Fair Trade Association

www.palestinefairtrade.org

*“When the last day of your life comes, plant the seedling that’s in your hand”
Palestinian Proverb*

The Trees for Life program, which is implemented by the Palestine Fair Trade Association (PFTA), www.palestinefairtrade.org, provides olive, pomegranate, and almond saplings to Palestinian fair-trade and organic farmers. While the program covers the majority of the cost, the farmers pay a symbolic percentage as a demonstration of their commitment. PFTA General Assembly, which is composed of elected representatives of 47 farmers coops, elects a committee of farmers called Trees for Life Committee. This committee is responsible for identifying sapling recipients, distribution, and implementation. The local Trees for Life committee works within the priorities set by PFTA and targets young families, starter farmers, small farmers, women farmers, and farmers who have recently cultivated lands that have been impacted by the Israeli wall or have been subject to field or tree destruction by the Israeli military. This year alone more than 11,159 saplings have been distributed to more than 250 farmers in various villages in Jenin area including Rumaneh, Kufur Dan, ‘Anin, Ti’niq, Burqin, and Al Yamoun and in the villages of Dair Sharaf, Sabastia, and ‘Asira in Nablus area.

Since the program started in 2006, the number of participating farmers has reached a 50% increase. While the trees have provided significant financial benefits to the farmers and their families, perhaps the most important contribution has been the renewed sense of hope and commitment to the land. According to Abu Rabi, a member of PFTA’s Trees for Life Committee, “the program has created a new confidence in our farmers. They now know that when others see them taking care of their trees they become a model that encourages others to reinvest in their lands so that their children have a secure future.”

Munir, a young farmer from the village of Rumaneh used to work inside Israel as a day laborer. When he could no longer enter Israel, he and his brothers opened a small bakery in the village. The brothers had inherited land from their father that is currently bordering the Israeli wall. Accessing the land is very difficult both logistically and in terms of safety. The army monitors his land on a 24-hour basis with cameras that keep a close watch on anyone working in it. When Munir heard about the Trees for Life program through an announcement at the local mosque he was very excited. He immediately approached the PFTA and applied. Munir was a perfect candidate. He is newly married, his land is right next to the wall, and he has already prepared his land for planting.

In March, Munir planted all the saplings he received transforming his father's land into a paradise of olive and almond trees that are anticipated to bear fruit in the next five years. Munir planted 150 saplings, which he says he could not have been able to plant this year if it weren't for the Trees for Life program "because after spending all my savings on preparing the land I had no money left to buy saplings. Trees for Life made it possible for me to afford new trees for my field."

However, nothing is more beautiful than watching Abu El Abid planting and watering his trees while singing and reciting poetry. His land borders the wall as well but the poetry of his words crosses every border as he tends his wild sage, oregano, and olive trees. Abu El Abid is in his late sixties but watching him working away in his mountainous terraces would make one think he is hardly twenty. For many years he maintained his family farm while working in construction but these days he is solely dedicated to working in his land. With 40 new olive saplings he is keeping busy plowing and writing poetry.

Another farmer in the historical village of Ti'nik is a retired teacher. Haj Faris, wakes up at dawn every day for Morning Prayer. He collects his tools and walks down the hills of Ti'nik on a rocky path and up to the top of the hill where his land lies. His saplings are carefully planted with measured distances. He walks up to his water reservoir and checks if the rain has filled it enough for him to start watering the trees. He takes one bucket at a time and waters each sapling individually. He is very proud of how well they are doing because he says, "when you serve your tree well it will give you good fruit." He points to the large water reservoir across the way inside Israel and explains how prior to 1967 he used to go up and down the street that now serves as a separator between his village and the next village over. Seemingly uninterrupted by the challenges in front of him, he walks back down to his house in the village where the reminisces of the tanks destroying his garden fence remind him that planting a new tree "is the only thing we can do to teach our children that life is worth living." His brother, Abu Hussein, who sits next to him as he serves hot tea says: "as much as I work the land, I never feel tired." And when you look at his cracked hands you see soil, sun, and a life-long love affair with the earth.



*Abu Hussein's Hands- Haj Faris's brother. Tea break.
Photo by: Vivien Sansour*

Serving the tree is an honored concept in Palestinian villages. Farmers who have inherited their trees from their great grandfathers feel that it is their duty to give the tree the utmost respect and service because it gives them food and life. That is why farmers refer to their work as *al-khidma* “the service”. When asked about their crop expectations for any given year their answer is almost always: *depends on the service*.

In that same spirit farmers have been taking their families for generations to the fields where everyone enjoys picnicking and singing while the children learn how to be good stewards of the family trees. As Abu Rabi remembers, “my grandmother, Fatoum, would go to the wild and cut off a seedling from the Roman olive trees. She would bring it home and plant it, water it, and take care of it so that I would have trees today. In my turn, I teach my children about the land and the tree is passed on from one generation to the next.” And in many ways Trees for Life is doing just that. It is bringing the saplings today so that Palestinian farmers will have a future tomorrow.

PFTA’s olive oil buyers, and a network of solidarity organizations in Europe and North America fund Trees for Life program. The contributors to this year planting include Olive Coop (UK); Zetoun (Canada); and Canaan Fair Trade, Import Peace, Jewish Voice for Peace, US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, and the Resource Center for Non-Violence- Santa Cruz. PFTA farmers extend their sincere thanks and gratitude to these organizations and the thousands of individuals who contributed through them to the livelihood and sustainability of Palestinian farmers.

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Trees for Life planting of 2010.
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