



Redwood Empire Chapter Newsletter

August 2009

POMEGRANATE ROADS

by Linda Robertson

Dr. Gregory Levin is well known among pomegranate enthusiasts. He is an authority on pomegranates, a botanist from the former Soviet Union, who, over a forty-year career at a research station in the back of beyond, amassed the greatest collection of pomegranate varieties in the world.

Dr. Levin's autobiographical memoir, *Pomegranate Roads*, was published in 2006. It's an amazing story on many levels: the biography of a man who grew up during the horrendous years of World War II in Russia, worked as a scientist under the Soviet regime, and made a career doing field work in wild and fascinating places.

Dr. Levin was a child in Leningrad during the terrible siege of that city during World War II. Many members of his family had died in the purges that had followed Stalin's rise to power in the 1930s; and almost all the rest, including his father and his uncles, died during the siege. Only he and his mother survived the war; and he writes poignantly of the years during which he continued to hope that his father, who had been declared missing in action, would someday come home.

Even in childhood, he writes, he was interested in plants; and he helped keep himself and his mother from starving during the war by digging roots, and cured his mother of scurvy with a tea made from pine needles.

As a young man, he worked as a gardener and then a researcher, but his education was slowed by the Soviets' discrimination against Jews, and he was in his late



California Rare Fruit Growers

Redwood Empire Chapter

presents the

2009 Festival of Fruit

The Year of the Olive

Wednesday August 12th

through

Sunday August 16th

Please join us for tours and special events
Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday.

Saturday: A full day of speakers, workshops, vendor
booths, and much more at Santa Rosa Junior College.

Saturday evening: Dinner at Shone Farm.

To contact us during the Festival,
or for general information,
call (707) 241-5821.

twenties when he was finally admitted to graduate school. In 1961, he was assigned a research project about apple trees in Turkmenistan and took up residence at the Turkmen Experimental Agricultural Research Station in Garrigala. He spent the next forty years there among the remote mountains and deserts of central Asia gathering, studying, and cultivating pomegranates, a collection which eventually grew to over 1,100 varieties. He married another researcher at the station and raised two children.

Central Asia is one of the centers of origin and evolution of subtropical fruit varieties, including pomegranates, almonds, and walnuts. Wild pomegranates, in infinite variety, grow throughout the mountains of Turkmenistan, clustered along river banks, clinging to steep hillsides, hiding in crevices, and growing as creeping shrubs on rocky slopes. Cultivated varieties, the products of thousands of years of selective breeding, grow in

orchards, in the gardens of villagers, and among the ruins of deserted settlements in the mountains.

Dr. Levin's subtitle for his book is "A Soviet Botanist's Exile from Eden." But the Eden he describes is not just Eden in the sense of an ideal land remembered, but the Eden of creation, where everything originated. Central Asia is home of the wild ancestors of many domesticated vegetables and fruits. But it isn't a serene or particularly friendly place to the people who have spent millennia inventing ways of farming in a desert land. It is a place of mountains and steep canyons, hot dry winds and torrential, flooding rains, dirt tracks, and tottering bridges, a vast, sparse back country where, here and there, civilizations briefly took hold, only to be uprooted by invasion or wither away from drought. Again and again, in his field excursions, Dr. Levin writes of finding ruined cities and deserted villages with pomegranate and nut trees still growing in their abandoned gardens.

A lot of his book is anecdotes, the sorts of war stories field biologists love to tell – cheerful accounts of heat, dust, cold, drenching rain, flash floods, deadly mountain roads, overturned trucks, poisonous snakes, and samples and data lost in freak accidents. After his third serious car wreck in Turkmenistan, Dr. Levin writes, the doctor who removed his stitches told him he was born lucky and would be accident-free for the rest of his life. In the doctor's cosmology, fate had only a limited number of chances to do Dr. Levin in and had used them all without success.

The exile in the book's subtitle took place after the fall of the Soviet Union, when Turkmenistan became an

independent state and Soviet money stopped flowing to the Garrigala station. Dr. Levin and his wife struggled for awhile to keep up their work at the station, but finally had to give it up; and they emigrated to Israel. Dr. Levin was able to send out or take with him about 200 samples from his collection; the rest were ploughed under when most of the research station was leveled at the direction of the new government of Turkmenistan, to make space for vegetable farms.

Russians seem to have a gift for looking despair in the eye and moving on. One of Dr. Levin's favorite quotes in his book, from a Leningrad poet, is, "One does not choose one's times; one just lives in them and dies." But his memoir is anything but depressing. He looks back affectionately on his life and work and philosophically on its tragedies and reversals. "My entire life was in a garden," he says, summing it up, "the way I wanted it, and under the canopy of Science, attentive to nature and her riddles."

Over 100 of Dr. Levin's pomegranate cultivars were sent to the USDA Germplasm Repository at the Wolfskill Ranch and are planted in an orchard there. To walk through the rows of bushes on a golden fall afternoon, reading the exotic names on the metal tags, seeing the golds and siennas and reds of the fruit, and tasting the jewel-like red and pinkish arils in those that have cracked open like so many miniature cornucopias, is to feel a connection, as Dr. Levin did, with something ancient and marvelous in the mountains of central Asia – with an Eden, not just of pomegranates, but of agriculture and Eurasian civilization itself.

RECRFG'S SOLAR DRYER WORKSHOP

Over several weekends last May and June, in a mobilization of volunteer forces second only to the Festival of Fruit, Mike Roa organized the building of a dozen solar fruit dryers for our chapter.

Mike began the project last winter, researching dryer plans and building three prototypes which he compared for performance and ease of construction. After deciding on a design, he sent out an e-mail inviting the first ten people interested in building a dryer to come to a workshop at his home over Memorial Day weekend, where, for some time and the cost of materials, they could build themselves a dryer under his supervision. Ten people signed up within a day. I missed the initial call, but ended up with a place in the workshop after someone cancelled.

The plan was for the ten of us to work together and build twelve dryers, one for each of us plus a couple to sell for the benefit of the chapter. Before we showed up, another crew of volunteers had cut the wooden parts of the dryers, so that when we arrived the precut pieces of the frames were lined up and ready to bolt together. Several of us had gone out to local dumps and recycling centers and salvaged a lot of aluminum window screen frames for the trays, and other volunteers had pulled the screens out of the frames, saving the rubber splines that held them in. Our

job at the workshop was to assemble the dryers from the precut pieces and make the trays – ten for each one – from the aluminum window screen frames, the splines, and new fiberglass screening.

It was, I'd say, a character-building experience. The work divided into three basic tasks: assembling the wood and plexiglas dryer boxes, constructing the aluminum frames for the trays, and putting the screening into the tray frames. To share the work, we took turns doing each.

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Finished but unpainted dryer box

POMEGRANATES & PERSIMMONS AT WOLFSKILL

Pomegranates are getting a wider audience, with all the publicity about their health benefits. Their growing popularity was reflected by the crowd that showed up for the annual pomegranate and persimmon tasting at Wolfskill Ranch last November.

The day was threatening rain, so the long tasting table was moved inside, to one of the ranch's outbuildings. Eighteen varieties of pomegranates and six of persimmons were set out for tasting, the persimmons cut into wedges, the pomegranates in big bowls of red and pink arils, shiny as polished gemstones. Behind each bowl sat a few whole fruit of each variety and a stem or two of leaves, to give the tasters a sense of how the whole fruit looks on the tree.

People tasting fruit were standing 3 deep at the table, and it was hard to get close enough to read all the labels and taste the different varieties. Jeff Moersfelder, the greenhouse manager, talked at one point about plans to expand the event into something larger, a pomegranate festival. But for now, we all jostled our way in well-mannered chaos along the table, moving down the row with tiny paper cups, sampling a few arils from each bowl and writing our observations on a spreadsheet. For the benefit of the Wolfskill researchers, we also ranked our five favorite varieties among the ones we tasted.

This was my second pomegranate tasting, and I was amazed again at how many different types there were and how much difference there was among them. For most of my adult life, I've known only one kind of pomegranate, the red ones from the supermarket. At the tasting, the fruits ranged from wine red and intensely tangy to pale pink with the subtlest of flavors and almost no acid, from seeds as hard as wood to arils you could easily chew and swallow. They came from all over the world, with exotic names like Sin Pepe, Palermo, Parfianka, Gissarski Rozovy, Desertnyi, and more prosaic, such as Ink, Fleischman's and Wonderful.

We also tasted persimmons, but with only five or six varieties on display, they were a minor part of the show. My personal favorites were Maekawajiro and Izu, two crunchy, non-astringent types.

Afterwards came what is almost my favorite part of an altogether revelatory morning: a trip to the orchard where the pomegranates grow on bushy little trees, more like big shrubs. There was a shuttle, but a lot of us chose to walk down the ranch roads, stopping along the way to pick some late plums.

In the pomegranate orchard were dozens of varieties, almost all different from the ones we tasted. On the metal ID tags were even stranger and more curious names; my guess was that many of them were from the collection given to Wolfskill by botanist Gregory Levin, who spent 40 years gathering and growing over 1,100 pomegranate cultivars at a research station in Turkmenistan. The over 100 varieties he gave to Wolfskill represent less than a tenth of them.

We were invited to pick some of the fruit to take home. I tried to limit myself to only as many as I figured I could realistically eat, plus a couple for sharing, but it wasn't easy. At tree after tree, I found split fruit, tasted the seeds, loved them, and added one more pomegranate to my tote bag. Some people had brought marking pens to label the varieties they picked. I didn't have one, though, and for the next several weeks I ate my way through about ten pomegranates with no idea what each one was, just that they were all different and all really, really good.

For the benefit of readers who might be interested in finding a pomegranate variety to grow at home, here are the scores:

The varieties featured at the tasting (with occasional guesses at spellings) were:

Sin Pepe
Fleischman's
Medovyi Vasha
Mayadzhi
Sirinevyi
Nikitsi Ranni
Doroshti Shananshahi
Parfianka
Gissarski Rozovy
Desertnyi
Ariana
Andalib
Palermo
Ink
Purple Heart
Wonderful
Molla-nepes
Haku-Botan

There were a few favorites, though no clear winner. From the 43 tasters who submitted score sheets, six ranked Ariana or Ink as their favorite, and Parfianka got five votes. Ink and Ariana also made it into most tasters' top five, with 24 votes for Ink and 23 for Ariana. The closest runner-ups were Desertnyi, with 18 votes and Parfianka with 16. All the favorites were dark-seeded varieties, with intense, classic pomegranate flavor and a good balance of sweetness and acidity.



Solar Dryer Workshop [cont.]

Everyone’s least favorite job was the screening. It was a time-consuming, picky job involving pushing screen and a length of thin rubber tubing, called a spline, which holds the screen in place in the window frame, into a narrow trough in the frame, using a splining tool, a fiddly little metal wheel on a handle. The splines and the troughs in the salvaged screen frames came in a variety of sizes, making it a challenge to match splines with frames; and the wheel wanted nothing so much as to leap out of its track and across the user’s knuckles, barking them and ripping the nearest bit of screening.

To me, the best part was putting together the frames for the trays. The frames were made from the aluminum window screens, which had to be taken apart and cut into lengths and the pieces reassembled into smaller rectangles. Pulling the window screens apart at their corner joints took some muscle, but then we got to cut them into pieces with a chop saw. I work in an office and don’t normally interact with any piece of machinery tougher than a photocopier, so for me the chop saw was thrilling, noisy, and impressively dangerous, not to mention that it cut through the aluminum screens with awesome speed. In accordance with somebody’s Law, the project ran into a few unexpected glitches and took longer than we expected; and a few of us came back over the following weekend to finish the last bits of the dryers and trays. Eventually, though, we each had a proud creation of plywood and plexiglas to take home with us. It took me a few more weeks to get around to using the NVOC paint Mike had bought to paint my unit the regulation heat-absorbing black. Since then, it has spent the summer sitting in the one reliably sunny spot in my yard, my driveway, looking a little sinister in dull black, like some obscure home-made weapon. It has done a great job drying some sage and several batches of nectarines, and I’m about to try fruit leather and apples in it.

Whether the dryer was worth the time and effort we put into it, in economic terms, is a good question, but probably not very relevant to how I feel when I consider the actually pretty enjoyable time I had working on it and the proprietary pride I have when I walk out and see it hulking next to my mailbox. What comes to mind then is one of my favorite lines from “A Hard Day’s Night,” the answer one of the Beatles gave when asked what he thought about the future: “Built it myself, and I love it.”

Newsletter Staff

Editor.....Linda Robertson
Layabout.....Michael Kurland

time flies like an arrow - fruit flies like a banana



**SAVE THE DATE:
FIG TASTING AT WOLFSKILL RANCH**

This year’s fig tasting at Wolfskill Ranch will be on Saturday, September 12, at 10:00. In the past, the event has included samples of figs and grapes and interesting talks by researchers and other staff people at Wolfskill about the research being done there on fig and grape varieties. And Howard Garrison assures us he plans to cook his not-to-be-missed grilled figs with prosciutto and goat cheese. It’s a great opportunity to taste grape and fig varieties you may not find anywhere else and see the 70 amazing acres of fruit, nut and olive trees preserved on the ranch as part of the National Clonal Germplasm Repository. And did I mention the grilled figs with prosciutto and goat cheese?



Figs from last year’s tasting