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## MARKET TRENDS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FRESH FRUIT TRADE

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### ABSTRACT

The natural and climatic conditions in Bulgaria are a prerequisite for the cultivation of quality fruits with unique taste characteristics, but after the country's accession to the EU, there is a permanent tendency to decrease the areas on which fruit crops are grown. The consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables in developed and developing countries is far below the recommended norms, and yet production in the country cannot satisfy the needs of the population with fresh fruits and the canning industry with raw materials. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the characteristics of the fruit market in Bulgaria.

**Key words:** sustainability, agriculture, trade, fruits, production;

### INTRODUCTION

Fruit occupies an important place in the healthy nutrition of humans. It contains substances which cannot be supplied by any other food. It is a main source of vitamins, beneficial micro and macro elements, and is rich in antioxidants, fibre, organic acids, and easily absorbable carbohydrates.

Fruit has a considerable influence on the health of humans. It satisfies the body with energy, facilitates the correct exchange of substances, stimulates the good digestion and absorption of other nutrients. Fruit has a low fat content and is a good source of dietary fibre, therefore, a high fruit content diet may successfully control obesity and maintain a healthy weight, enhance the immune system, and reduce the risk of chronic diseases, such as cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis, etc.

Its sufficient daily intake can prevent major illnesses. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends the consumption of at least 400 g of

fruit and vegetables per day (1). This quantity defends the organism against chronic diseases, or micro-nutrient deficiencies, especially in developing countries. Despite the positive effects on health, fruit and vegetables are consumed less than the recommended daily ratio in most developed and developing countries (1).

Fruit consumption in Bulgaria in recent years is approximately 53 kg on average per capita. This is about 150 g daily, or 25% less than the norm recommended by WHO.

However, these numbers are worrisome not only for Bulgarians. The last estimations of Freshfel Europe Consumption Monitor show that the average daily consumption of fresh produce among Europeans in 2022 has dropped by 10% - up to 364 g per capita, and is below the 400 g recommended by WHO. This is due both to the eating habits of the population, and the decreased consumption by people with low income (2).

In Bulgaria, the annual total income per person of a household in 2022 grew by 16.9% compared to 2021, yet the consumption of most main food products on average per person of household decreased. The drop in fruit consumption is by 2.8 kg, and of vegetables – by 0.8 kg. The purchase

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capacity of households for most main food products also decreased in 2022 versus 2021 (3).

## METHODS

To achieve the aim of this study, we used the tools of comparative analysis and methods, based on statistical data, systemic and structural approach, induction and deduction.

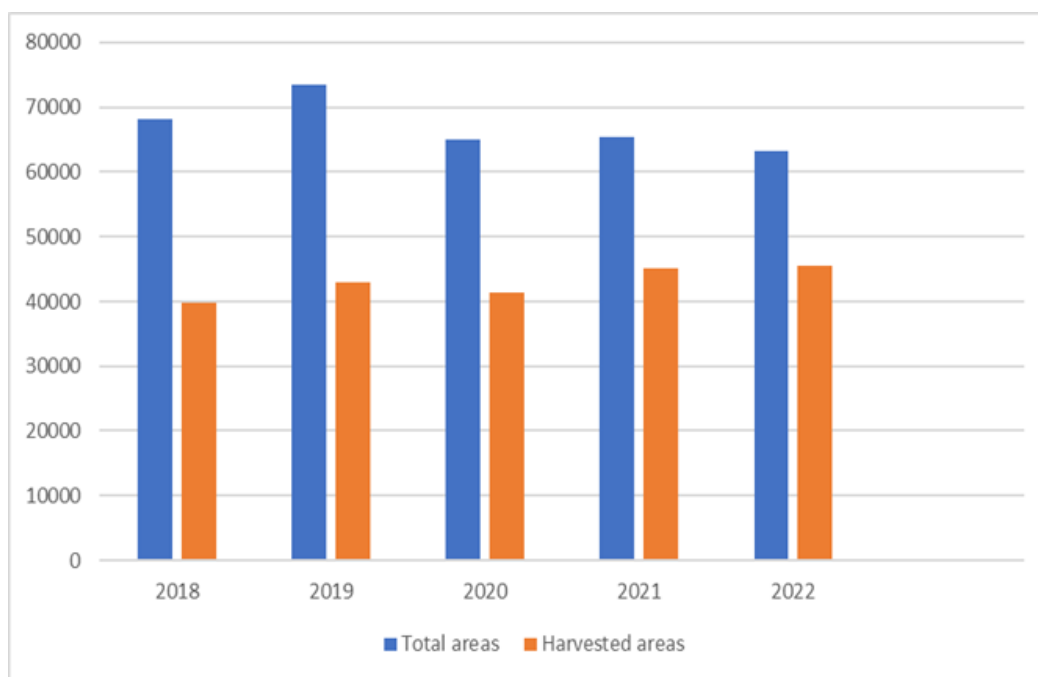
The study is focused on the fruit sector, because of its central place for feeding the population. A major data source used in this study is the Department of Agrostatics in the Ministry of Agriculture and Foods and the National Statistics Institute.

## RESULTS

The diverse soil and climate conditions in the country are suitable for growing different fruit species and varieties. When creating new plantings, it is necessary to take into account the species and variety structure of the ecological

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 characteristics of the area and the possibility of selecting varieties resistant to diseases and enemies. Contemporary fruit production with separate orchard types depends on many other factors, some of which are significantly impactful: cultivation technologies used, lack of sufficient and qualified labor resources, mechanization of production processes, competitiveness of production. Small enterprises operate without distribution agreements, or serious market research, which almost always leads to periodical crises and under or oversupply (4, 5).

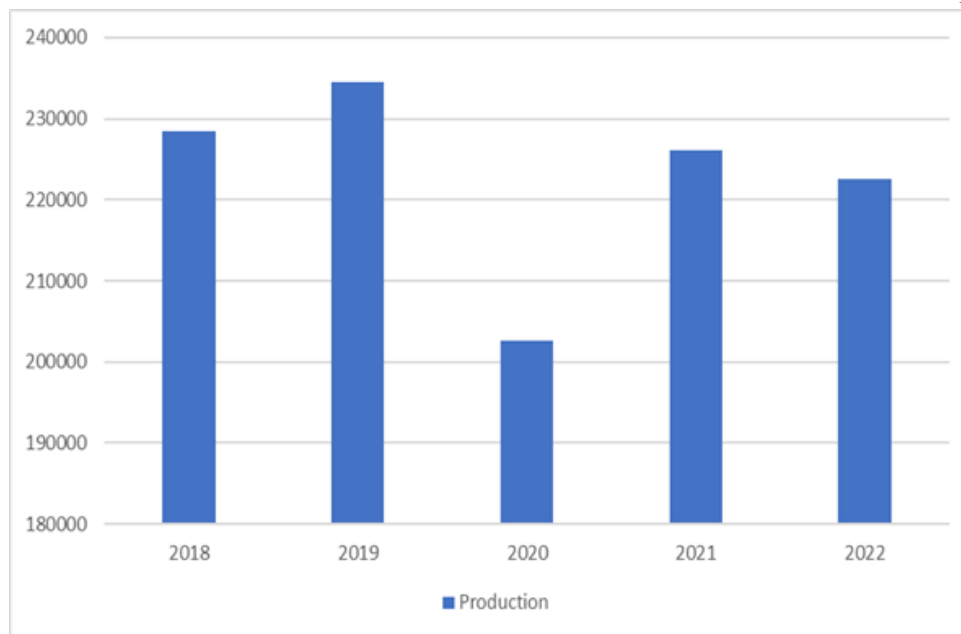
During the studied period of 2018-2022, most fruit was produced in 2019 - 234 589 tonnes (6). A main factor for the increased production is the increase of the common areas planted with orchard trees and the growth of the harvested areas by 7.6%, compared to the previous year (**Figure 1 and Figure 2**).



**Figure 1.** Areas and harvested areas with fruit during 2018-2022 in hectares

In this period, the lowest fruit production took place in 2020 - 202 579 tonnes, which was 13.6% less than in 2019, whereas the harvested areas were 3.5% less. The low production level was due

to the imposed COVID-19 restrictions, and difficulties in fruit harvesting.



**Figure 2.** Fruit production in Bulgaria during 2018-2022 in tonnes

In 2021, there was an increase of the harvested areas by 9% versus the previous year and an increase in fruit production by 12%.

In 2022, the produced fruit amounted to nearly 2% less than 2021, and an insignificant increase of the harvested areas by 1% was noted.

In 2022, out of the total fruit production, the biggest was the relative share of plums and damsons - 25%, followed by cherries - 24%, and apples - 21%. The structure of the whole studied period was similar.

Reasons for the reduced fruit production in recent years were not only the reduced areas, but also the decrease in the average yield. This is due to the strong impact of the deteriorated agrometeorological conditions – late frosts, hails, warm winter, strong rainfall, and long periods of draught, high temperatures.

In 2022, 97% of the total fruit production was sold on the market, 52% were intended for direct sale and on the market, and the quantity for processing was 41%. Similar is the structure of the selling of the produced fruit in the other years of the studied period.

The deficiency of fruit grown in Bulgaria is compensated by import. From an exporter, Bulgaria has become a net importer, because it cannot meet the needs of the population for fresh fruit (7, 8).

Agriculture occupies a significant share in the foreign trade of Bulgaria, by traditionally forming a positive trade balance, yet in fruit trade Bulgaria has a constant surplus for only two of the customs tariff positions – frozen fruit and temporarily preserved fruit. For all others, the balance in most cases is strongly negative ranging in tens of thousands of tonnes.

## CONCLUSION

The sectoral structure of the production is simplified with leading extensive crops, such as grain and sunflower. The area of intensive crops (fruit, grape, field vegetables), which creates all-year-round employment and procure higher income of producers is drastically decreasing. The trend in limiting the orchard area is irreversible: from 1170 thousand decares in 1998 it dropped to 710 thousand decares in 2006, and from 694 thousand decares in 2011 to 633 thousand decares in 2022. Reduced production areas also lead to a drop in the amount of production. Own production cannot satisfy the population's consumption of fresh fruits, which are an

indispensable part of the Bulgarian population's table, and the country is becoming a net importer.

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