



## OLIVES

Olives are the oldest trees in continuous cultivation in the western world. Natives of the Mediterranean, they were first cultivated 4000 years ago in Asia minor. Initially they were grown for the oil that could be extracted and only later in the time of the Cretans and Minoans were the fruits used for the table. Olive trees were silent witnesses to the beginning of agriculture and what we now call civilisation in the fertile crescent of the Middle East.

It is more than likely that olive oil was the fuel that provided lamps to read the early forms of written language.

Olive oil was as important to biblical economies as petroleum oil is to our 20th century lifestyle. It was used for cooking, preserving other foods such as anchovies and artichokes, for illumination in homes and temples, for rubbing into the skin to keep it supple and warm and medicinally because it is a mild laxative. The fruits were a staple food and even the tough strong timber was used to make tool handles.

Olive oil is the butter of the Mediterranean. Bread is literally dipped in oil rather than spread with animal based butter. The low rates of arterial heart disease of peoples who consume this oil based diet has triggered research into the qualities of olives. We now understand that olive oil is a mono unsaturated fat that doesn't seem to raise blood cholesterol. In addition it contains omega three, another heart disease fighter.

The first olive tree in WA. was planted by our Governor James Stirling in 1829. This tree has grown to some twenty metres high and looks in robust good health today in the grounds of Government House gardens in the centre of Perth. This single tree demonstrates by its very presence that the olive is brilliantly adapted to life down under.

When it comes to landscaping it seems that olive trees have just been discovered. Apart from their ability to succeed in some of the most inhospitable seaside and inland locations, older trees have an appealing sculptured and architectural shape. There is now a brisk trade in old transplanted olives trees to give grace and a sense of permanence to the landscape.

It is possible to obtain 30 to 40 year old trees from abandoned orchards through transplanting companies. They can bring grace and a feeling of antiquity to a garden. Obviously they fit in beautifully with a Mediterranean style of open outdoor living. If you don't have room for a tree in the garden then you can always grow an olive in a tub on the patio.

The City of Stirling has recently made a major ornamental planting of olive trees. You will see this inspired landscape in Cedric St adjacent to the Council offices running up to the on ramp for the Mitchell freeway. At the base is an extensive planting of lavender to match the steel grey colours of the table trees. These tough Mediterranean plants not only look good in combination, they are virtually unkillable once they have established a deep root system.

The climate of Perth is ideal for growing this tree as we have long hot summers to mature the fruit. Olives need full sun exposure and free draining soil or they can have trouble with root rot diseases. High humidity such as you would find near the tropics interferes with pollination and cause barren trees.

Mature olive trees have been known to survive severe frosts of around minus 9 degrees Celsius. However they can lose their crop in lighter frosts if they occur during flowering. While the tree is extremely drought tolerant one or two deep waterings through summer will make a big difference to cropping. Similarly trees don't have to be fed to crop but a twice annual application of Waldecks All Purpose fertiliser will improve the yield.

## VARIETIES

Make sure you buy a fruiting variety as there are non fruiterers that produce only occasional fruit. Seedling plants are slow to commence bearing and the quality of the fruit is normally poor being small and possessing little flesh.

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The main types are:- "Verdale" is a medium size fruit used both for oil and processing, "Mission" has small fruits with good flavour and a relatively high oil content, "Manzanillo" has large fruit on a low bushy tree and is most commonly processed, "Sevillano" has exceptionally large fruit for processing and "UC 13A6" (named by the University of California where it was first selected) is a large fruiting type with a small stone that produces heavy crops in very hot climates.

## HARVESTING

Fruits mature after summer in April or May. They can be picked green or allowed to mature black, for curing. Equally for oil production, fruits can be green or black. Fresh from the tree the fruits are extremely bitter and inedible.

So whatever the use you have in mind you need to process the fruit to remove the bitterness.

When it comes to processing olives it is important that you treat the ripe fruits with care as they bruise easily. This affects the quality of end product. While the fruits are commonly shaken from the tree onto Hessian mats, hand picking will keep bruising to a minimum.

By coating your fingers in sticky tape they will slide over the foliage and you can harvest olives all day without wrecking your fingers.

## OIL PRODUCTION

I discovered this home recipe for extraction in an American fruit book. I'm sure it works but you need to find a suitable press to give it a try. Good luck in your search.

Dry the fresh picked olives in a warm place out of the sun for a week or 10 days turning regularly a few times a day. Press the fruits in an olive or cider press but don't get so enthusiastic that you crush the seeds as this oil is of inferior flavour. Strain the juice through cheesecloth into glass jars and allow to settle. To clarify the oil you will need to siphon off the clearing liquid every two weeks for up to 5 times. When the oil is clear pour it off into sterilised jars and seal.

## PICKLED AND PROCESSED FRUITS

Many methods of preserving olives call for the use of lye or caustic soda to break down the astringent qualities of the fresh fruit. I don't like to recommend them because lye needs to be handled with great care and the danger of botulism developing in low acid home bottled olives is a real concern. Here's a safer and easier method. Cover olives with clean water and change every day for 2 weeks to leach out some of the bitterness. Next prepare a brine solution by mixing around 125g of cooking salt to 5 litres of water. Place the fruits in the brine and cover with a cloth weighed down with a plate so that you achieve complete submersion

Leave for three weeks and then transfer into a mix of one third brine, one third vinegar and the last third of olive oil. Into this mix add plenty of flavouring herbs such as garlic, bay leaves, fennel and chilli. After about 6 weeks your table olives should be ready to eat. Before you pass them around to friends it's a good idea to make sure they pass the essential taste test.

## **SIMPLE RECIPE FOR BRUSCHETTA LUCARONI**

The best flavour comes from unheated, extra virgin olive oil. Here's a breakfast or an entree for champions  
'Mediterranean style' called bruschetta.

Toast slices of Italian bread then rub with a raw clove of garlic. Sprinkle with salt and pour on generous quantities of extra virgin olive oil. Slice fresh tomato and add a dusting of Italian herbs and there you have it. Buon appetito !