

Olea europaea

[Synonyms : *Olea gallica*, *Olea lancifolia*, *Olea oleaster*]

OLIVE (English, French, German) is a cultivated evergreen shrub or tree. From the Mediterranean (probably a subspecies of wild olive, *Olea africana*) it has small fragrant, off-white flowers.

It is also known as *Arbre éternel* (French), Common olive, Common olive tree, *Echter olbaum* (German), Edible olive, *Eliá* (Greek), Lady's oil, *Măslin* (Rumanian), *Oleastro* (Italian), *Oelbaum* (German), *Oliivi* (Finnish), *Oliv* (Swedish), *Oliva európska* (Slovak), *Olivarbo* (Esperanto), *Olivenbaum* (German), *Olivier* (French), *Olivo* (Italian, Spanish), *Olivovník evropský* (Czech), *Saidun* (Tamil), *Ulivo* (Italian), Wild olive, *Zaitūn* (Arabic), *Zebbug* (Maltese), and *Zeytun ag* (Turkish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of peace (branch).

The centre of the trunk of extremely old trees can decompose leaving an outer framework. The small glossy dark purplish-black fruit are harvested by hand. The tree is beaten with long poles to bring the fruit down on to sheets (today usually made of plastic) laid on the ground below, and they are then taken to the motorised presses. (In days gone by these presses were driven by circling donkeys.) Oil extracted from the fruit for medicinal purposes needs to have been obtained by the 'cold press' method for its active ingredients to remain undiminished.

Europaea means 'of or from Europe'.

There are those who claim that olive trees can survive for over a thousand years, and that some trees growing in the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem at the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries were alive in the time of Christ. However botanists are more circumspect and believe that olive trees only last from 300-600 years. Today gradually more and more old olive orchards are no longer being cultivated as olive oil is supplanted with other cheaper vegetable oils. (There is a theory that left to their own devices olive trees thrive better than if they are tended.)

Olives were already being cultivated north of the Dead Sea, primarily for oil, during the late Mesolithic Age or Middle Stone Age from about 3700-3600 BC, and the trees are believed to have been grown by the Minoans on Crete in about 3500 BC. In the Western World the olive is considered by many authorities to hold the record as the tree that has been in continuous cultivation for the longest period.

The ancient Egyptians believed that their goddess Isis revealed the secret of the extraction of the fruit oil to them. They used this oil not only for lighting and cooking but also for anointing their hair (and their bodies too to keep the skin supple) as well as using it during the mummification process. It is even believed that olive oil provided a lubricant to ease the movement of the great blocks of stone used for the pyramids. Ancient Egyptians also wove the leaves into wreaths for burial ceremonies. The importance of the olive in the Middle East around 1200 BC is illustrated by the decision made by the famous prophet, Moses (who lived in the 13th Century and early part of the 12th Century BC) to exempt any man involved in its cultivation from military service. [There is a view among some scholars today that Moses is portrayed in the Old Testament of the *Bible* as the ideal leader of men and that some of the stories told about him are similar to ones told

elsewhere about other leaders of that period. If this is correct and this story is an example of them it only emphasizes the importance of olive cultivation in the region as a whole then.]

Ancient Greek myth attributes man's initial understanding of the olive's value to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. The patronage of the Greek peninsula known as Attica (of which Athens was the principal city) was vied for by Athene and Poseidon, god of the sea, in a contest to provide the best gift to the inhabitants. When Athena struck the ground with her spear an olive tree sprang up, while a horse appeared from the thrust of Poseidon's trident (some versions suggest it was not a horse but water that poured from the rock struck by the sea god). The gods on Mount Olympus awarded the patronage to Athena, after whom Athens was named, on the basis that a symbol of peace and agriculture was infinitely more desirable than a symbol of war (or salt water).

Thus Athens determined that this 'gift from Athene' be grown in preference to wheat (*Triticum*). Early in the 6th Century BC Solon (640 or 638 to 559 BC), the Athenian lawgiver, merchant and poet who was appointed to reform the Greek constitution, decreed that olive oil was the only agricultural product that would be exported. The fruit provided a continuous source of food, the pressed oil was not only of value as a medicine (listed with 700 other substances in the *Ebers papyrus*, an ancient Egyptian medical document the German Egyptologist, Georg Moritz Ebers (1837-1898) that is believed to date back to about 1552 BC) and skin softener but it could also be used as a cooking oil or food preservative and a lamp oil – and it could be rubbed on the body as a protection against cold, and the cake left after the oil pressing could be fed to animals. However the decree was pursued so vigorously that by 4 BC Plato (c.428 BC-c.348 BC) the celebrated Greek philosopher, was to lament the loss of the green meadows that had been succeeded by bare white limestone – caused by severe soil erosion created by the olives' deep taproots. At the same time the wheat (*Triticum*), barley (*Hordeum*) and livestock that had been a familiar sight and had been sacrificed to this edict, had to be imported. Immediately the Country became vulnerable through its dependence upon this foreign produce and in order to protect the passage of her imports she had to establish a navy that would ensure her control of the seas.

Roman reliance on the olive rivalled that of the Greeks – but it is surprising to learn that although olive trees were introduced in the Marseille area of southern France between 680- 600 BC from Asia Minor they were not destined to grow on land under Roman rule until 50-100 years later. (Equally amazingly it is believed that Paris, in northern France, knew little of olive oil until the early 19th Century – long after even the United States.) Responsibility for the introduction of the tree to many Mediterranean countries is thought to lie primarily at the feet of the Romans. They not only took the tree with them nearly everywhere conducive to it but they also spread their knowledge of oil extraction and the preparation of table olives. This was the firm foundation upon which today's association of the olive tree and the Mediterranean exists. However the tree can be found far beyond European shores as for instance it was introduced to Latin America (Lima, Peru) in 1560 by the Spanish invaders, it arrived in California in the United States in 1769 (some say by the hands of Jesuit missionary fathers who brought it with them from Mexico), and it reached southern Australia in 1844 when 51 plants landed there from Marseilles in southern France. These latter trees must have luxuriated in their new home as in just on five years, at the 1851 London Exhibition, fruit from them are understood to have received an 'honourable mention'. Although the olive tree is believed to have appeared in China by the 6th Century it is little used there and authorities muse on the likelihood that its distinctive flavour as a cooking oil was incompatible with traditional Chinese cooking – and authorities note that in India the taste is also alien.

Returning to olive's many roles, the oil played an important part in religious and civic ceremonials. The athletes of ancient Greece were anointed with olive oil from a sacred grove, and Jewish temples burnt it in sanctuary lamps – as also did the Christian churches later. In more recent times the anointing ceremonies during French and English coronation rituals have also employed the oil.

As early as the 14th Century the still well known Castile soap was being exported from Spain. It owed its unusually sophisticated quality (for the time) in part to the substitution of olive oil for the original goat's tallow that had previously been used in its preparation.

The olive's symbolic significance varied from nation to nation. For the ancient Greeks it meant victory, whereas for the Hebrews the oil represented peace, stability and wealth (the Old Testament of the *Bible* reports that the olive was one of the fruits promised to the Jews in Canaan). And today the olive branch continues to be a symbol of peace and this seems now to be recognized internationally.

The olive (especially as a symbol of peace) appears in some of the plays and poetry of the famous English bard, William Shakespeare (1564-1616). A perfect example of this comes in *Twelfth Night*, when Viola says

.....I bring no overture of war, no taxation of homage. I
hold the olive in my hand; my words are as full of peace as matter.

It can also be found in a poem entitled *Frater Ave atque Vale* by Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892).

..... there we landed - 'O venusta Sirmio!'
There to me thro' all the groves of olive in the summer glow,
There beneath the Roman ruin

One of the coats of arms in which it now appears is that of Cyprus and this depicts a white dove bearing an olive branch. Another is that of Italy which shows an olive branch symbolizing the blessing of peace. A further example is provided by San Marino (off the north-western Adriatic Sea) and she has olive leaves displayed in her coat of arms.

The heavy, veined wood used to be carved into statues of gods. According to the Old Testament of the *Bible* it was also used for the tabernacle of Solomon's temple, and it provided hard wood for spear shafts. Much later the slightly fragrant yellow wood was sought after for small cabinet-work as well. Today this wood is used in carpentry.

The oil (with alcohol) has been used as a hair tonic.

Nowadays the fruit are a commercial ingredient familiar to the food industry. The oil is used by the cosmetics, textile (particularly for dressing wool), toiletry (soap) and pharmaceutical (medicines) industries.

Medicinally, the bark was once used to treat wounds. In the Middle East a decoction of the leaves has been used as a remedy for fevers. The oil has been applied externally for kidney, chest, muscular and skin disorders (including stings and burns), as well as for treating fluid retention, scarlet fever, typhoid and plague. Internally it has been used as a laxative. Today it can be used externally in liniments and embrocations, and internally to soften ear wax, as well as a laxative remedy for constipation and part of treatment for ulcers.