



Olea europaea

The olive, known by the botanical name *Olea europaea*, meaning "European olive", is a species of small tree in the family *Oleaceae*, found in the Mediterranean Basin from Portugal to the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and southern Asia as far east as China, as well as the Canary Islands and Réunion. The species is cultivated in many places and considered naturalized in all the countries of the Mediterranean coast, as well as in Argentina, Saudi Arabia, Java, Norfolk Island, California, and Bermuda.

The olive's fruit, also called the olive, is of major agricultural importance in the Mediterranean region as the source of olive oil; it is one of the core ingredients in Mediterranean cuisine. The tree and its fruit give their name to the plant family, which also includes species such as lilacs, jasmine, Forsythia, and the true ash trees (*Fraxinus*). The word derives from Latin *ōlīva* ("olive fruit", "olive tree"; "olive oil" is *ōlĕum*) a borrowing from the Greek *ἐλαία* (*elaía*, "olive fruit", "olive tree") and *ἐλαιον* (*élaion*, "olive oil") in the archaic form *ἐλαίφα.

Description

The olive tree, *Olea europaea*, is an evergreen tree or shrub native to the Mediterranean, Asia, and Africa. It is short and squat, and rarely exceeds 8–15 m (26–49 ft) in height. The silvery green leaves are oblong. The trunk is typically gnarled and twisted.

The small, white, feathery flowers, with ten-cleft calyx and corolla, two stamens, and bifid stigma, are borne generally on the previous year's wood, in racemes springing from the axils of the leaves.

The fruit is a small drupe, thinner-fleshed and smaller in wild plants than in orchard cultivars. Olives are harvested in the green to purple stage. Canned black olives have often been artificially blackened. *Olea europaea* contains a seed commonly referred to in American English as a pit or a rock, and in British English as a stone.

Cultivars

Since many olive cultivars are self-sterile or nearly so, they are generally planted in pairs with a single primary cultivar and a secondary cultivar selected for its ability to fertilize the primary one. In recent times, efforts have been directed at producing hybrid cultivars with qualities such as resistance to disease, quick growth, and larger or more consistent crops.

History

Prehistory

Fossil evidence indicates the olive tree had its origins some 20–40 million years ago in the Oligocene region corresponding to Italy and the eastern Mediterranean Basin. The olive plant later was first cultivated some 7,000 years ago in Mediterranean regions.

The edible olive seems to have coexisted with humans for about 5,000 to 6,000 years, going back to

Outside the Mediterranean

Olives are not native to the Americas. Spanish colonists brought the olive to the New World, where its cultivation prospered in present-day Peru and Chile. The first seedlings from Spain were planted in Lima by Antonio de Rivera in 1560.

Symbolic connotations

Olive oil has long been considered sacred. The olive branch was often a symbol of abundance, glory, and peace. The leafy branches of the olive tree were ritually offered to deities and powerful figures as emblems of benediction and purification, and they were used to crown the victors of friendly games and bloody wars. Today, olive oil is still used in many religious ceremonies. Over the years, the olive has also been used to symbolize wisdom, fertility, power, and purity.

Oldest known trees

Olive trees in the groves around the Mediterranean Sea are centuries old, with some dated to 2000 years. The olive tree on the island of Brijuni (Brioni), Istria in Croatia, has a radiocarbon dating age of about 1,600 years. It still gives fruit (about 30 kg or 66 lb per year), which is made into olive oil.

An olive tree in west Athens, named "Plato's Olive Tree", is thought to be a remnant of the grove where Plato's Academy was situated, making it an estimated 2,400 years old.

The town of Bshaale, Lebanon claims to have the oldest olive trees in the world (4000 BC for the oldest), but no scientific study supports these claims. Other trees in the towns of Amioun appear to be at least 1,500 years old.[57][58]

Uses

The olive tree, *Olea europaea*, has been cultivated for olive oil, fine wood, olive leaf, and the olive fruit. About 90% of all harvested olives are turned into oil, while about 10% are used as table olives. The olive is one of the "trinity" or "triad" of basic ingredients in Mediterranean cuisine, the other two being wheat for bread, pasta, and couscous, and the grape for wine.

Table olives

Table olives are classified by the IOC into three groups according to the degree of ripeness achieved before harvesting:

1. Green olives are picked when they have obtained full size, but before the ripening cycle has begun; they are usually shades of green to yellow.
2. Semiripe or turning-colour olives are picked at the beginning of the ripening cycle, when the colour has begun to change from green to multicolour shades of red to brown.

Only the skin is coloured, as the flesh of the fruit lacks pigmentation at this stage, unlike that of ripe olives.

3. Black olives or ripe olives are picked at full maturity when fully ripe. They are found in assorted shades of purple to brown to black.

Olive wood

Olive wood is very hard and is prized for its durability, colour, high combustion temperature, and interesting grain patterns. Because of the commercial importance of the fruit, and the slow growth and relatively small size of the tree, olive wood and its products are relatively expensive. Common uses of the wood include: kitchen utensils, carved wooden bowls, cutting boards, fine furniture, and decorative items.

The yellow or light greenish-brown wood is often finely veined with a darker tint; being very hard and close-grained, it is valued by woodworkers.

Cultivation

The earliest evidence for the domestication of olives comes from the Chalcolithic period archaeological site of Teleilat Ghassul in what is today modern Jordan.

Olives are now cultivated in many regions of the world with Mediterranean climates, such as South Africa, Chile, Peru, Australia, and California and in areas with temperate climates such as New Zealand, under irrigation in the Cuyo region in Argentina which has a desert climate. They are also grown in the Córdoba Province, Argentina, which has a temperate climate with rainy summers and dry winters (Cwa). The northernmost olive grove is placed in Anglesey, an island off the north west coast of Wales, in the United Kingdom: but it is too early to say if the growing will be successful, having been planted in 2006.