

Growing olives in Oregon

Olives have a rich, flavorful history in the world of agriculture. Olives have been cultivated for thousands of years, and some of the first agonomic writings recorded were about the crop. Archaeologists have found olive pits as old as 8,000 years, and evidence of oil production as long as 6,000 years ago.

The tree was a symbol of peace and unity in biblical times, and was part of Ancient Greek mythology, storied to be created by the goddess Athena. Olives have been considered important or even sacred by many peoples. It's said that King David had designated guards to protect the olive groves and warehouses that contained the fruit and oil of the trees.

Ancient civilizations used the oil from olives as an anointment for the dead, as perfume and as soap for washing. Gladiators and ancient Greek athletes used to lather themselves in olive oil prior to competing. The oil has been associated with power, wealth and nobility dating back thousands of years.

While olives have not been in the United States for thousands of years, they still have a deep-rooted history as a culturally and economically important crop. Olives were



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Extension Spotlight

transported from Spain to Peru in the 1500s, and from there Spanish Padres brought them to South America. Olive cuttings continued to move north and were established at the San Diego Mission in California in 1769.

California's climate is very suitable for olive production, and the crop thrived. At each of the 21 missions established by the missionaries, they planted olive trees. The olives grew very well, and as the years progressed, many farmers planted groves to produce oil in the 1800s. Olives continued to be a popular crop in the state, and planted acreage continued to grow.

However, in the 1900s, other oils began to replace the market for olive oil. The need for olive oil began to wane, and growers began replacing their oil producing varieties with table olive varieties.

As with many things in life, the pendulum swung back the other way and late in the 1900s, the market for olive oil

began to revitalize. The health benefits and taste of the oil came back into popularity. Today, there are around 30,000 acres planted with Olives in California.

While California is the largest U.S producer of olives, they aren't the only state in production. Alabama, Georgia, Arizona, Hawaii and Oregon all have acreage planted as well.

In Oregon, we are often considered the one of the most northern latitudes to successfully produce olives for oil.

Because we are on the fringe of suitable climate for olive production, there are a lot of considerations to make before planting trees. Local microclimates, soil type, sun exposure and access to water are all very important. Soils are pivotal to olive production. Olives don't like having wet feet; they need a well-drained soil to perform optimally.

Before planting olives, growers should take time to record their farms temperatures for at least a year. Determine the highs and lows in your area. It's very important to know when the first frost is going to be on the farm. Olives in Oregon get harvested before they fully ripen.

This is because the fruit cannot be on the tree during a frost event. The cold weather causes the fruit to weep, which lowers



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Olives involved with the North Willamette Research and Extension Center olive cold hardiness field trials.

the quality of the fruit. Because of this, almost all olives in Oregon are grown for oil. Our unique harvest timing, climate and soils give our oil its own terroir.

Our unique flavor profile is something worth noting. Oregon olives are often described as peppery, earthy and delicious.

If you are interested in learning how to grow olives in Oregon, the Oregon State University Extension Service Small Farms program is partnering with the River Ranch Olive Oil Company to host the second annual Growing Olives in Oregon Workshop. During this workshop, participants will tour the River Ranch Olive Oil farm, and learn about varieties and growing conditions for

olives in Oregon.

We will also be discussing crop pests, oil production and temperature tolerances. After the field tour, the farm manager will give a presentation on olives in Oregon, followed by extension updates from the OSU Olea program and an olive oil tasting.

Visit beav.es/iHt to sign up. Registration is required and sign-up ends on June 19. Please reach out to Logan Bennett with any questions or requests for accommodations.

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