

## Plant of the Week

# Olives

*Olea europaea*  
subsp. *europaea*

**Olive oil** and **olives** are now staples in most Australian households but this has only happened in recent years. Right up until the 1960s, olive oil was usually found only in medicine cabinets; most people used butter, margarine or dripping for cooking. It makes you shudder to think about it. Fortunately, for both our pleasure and our health, migrants arriving from Mediterranean countries have taught us how to enjoy olives and how to use olive oil.



Old Olive Trees near the Amphitheatre, Macquarie University.

Decades before their farms were bought for the Macquarie University campus, Italian families planted olive trees in the North Ryde area. There are still some of these original trees on campus, near the amphitheatre and near Culloden Road; a young olive tree has been planted in the forecourt of the new library in recognition of the early farmers. Right through to the present day, there have been University staff members familiar with the techniques of brining olives. In the late 60s when staff numbers were relatively small, “pickling parties” were held to collect and processed olives before packing them in brine. The “brining” process is necessary to remove *Oleuropein*, a bitter tasting glycoside<sup>1</sup>. (There are other methods of achieving this result.)

The actual origin of olives appears to have been lost in antiquity. The fruiting olive, *Olea europaea* subsp. *europaea* has been in cultivation for ~ 6,000 years. It is now considered to be a native of North Africa, the Mediterranean and Western Asia but it may have originated in North Africa from the African Olive (*Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*, syn. *O. chrysophylla*)<sup>2</sup>. Olive trees have been dated at 1,600 – 2,000 years old in many countries including Portugal, Croatia, Greece (Crete), Lebanon, Palestine and Israel<sup>1</sup>.



The first olives to be grown in Australia were planted in Parramatta in 1805. Now they are grown commercially in every state and territory and we can enjoy the luxury of outstanding quality Australian olives and olive oils.

There is a downside to the story of olives in Australia, however. The closely related African Olive (*Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*) introduced into Australia as a hedging plant and as an understock for the fruiting Olive, has proved to be an invasive weed of mammoth proportions. This problem and the development of management strategies has been the focus of studies by Peter Cuneo (Australian Botanic Garden, Mount Annan and Ph.D. student at Macquarie University) and Michelle Leishman (Biological Sciences, Macquarie University)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olives>

<sup>2</sup> Turrill, W.B. (1951) *Wild and cultivated olives*. *Kew Bull.* 3:437–442.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Cuneo and Michelle R Leishman 2006 African Olive (*Olea europaea* subsp. *cuspidata*) as an environmental weed in eastern Australia: a review. *Cunninghamia* 9(4): 545-577..



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