Olive Tree

The botanical name of the olive is *Olea europaea*, named after the oil that the fruit contains. Olives grow on a small tree or shrub that is native to the coastal areas of the eastern Mediterranean, northern Iraq and Iran. It now grows all around the Mediterranean and on other continents. Many Mediterranean languages have a name related to its oil, such as ancient Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic. It may be native to northern Africa. Olives have been cultivated for as long as 8000 years in the Mediterranean region.

One cup of olives, or 135 grams, supplies 155 calories, and 130 of those calories are a healthy type of fat. The fruit provides antioxidant vitamins A and E, and minerals like iron, calcium, and copper, as well as dietary fiber. The fruit is a powerful health booster. Olive oil is a widely used, very nutritious ingredient in food preparation.

The olive tree does best in poor, limestone soils, in coastal areas and on hilly slopes. Olive trees can survive drought and hot weather, and if injured, the tree will grow new shoots. Olive trees grow slowly and live for centuries, producing olives if pruned and well cared for. Olives are harvested in autumn and winter. The olives are crushed and pressed to give oil. Edible varieties are soaked in brine (salt solution) to get rid of their bitter taste.

The olive tree shown, from Croatia, is believed to be 1,500 years old. For its abundance of fruit and the olive oil that can be pressed from it, the olive tree is considered sacred by many religions. The ancient Greeks gave olive wreaths to winning athletes, and anointed (rubbed) their bodies with oil. The oil is used in lamps for light, as a cosmetic, as a medicine, and edible oil or for cooking. The wood is very hard and is prized for woodworking.

The Mediterranean region produces 95% of the world’s olives and olive oil. Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Morocco, and Syria are the top producers of olives. The red lines on the map show the borders of the areas where olive trees grow. The image shows an old-fashioned olive press in Mallorca, Spain. Olives are harvested by shaking the tree onto cloths on the ground. Then they are crushed and pressed for oil, or cured in salt for eating.