

The olive tree belongs to the family *Oleaceae*. It is native to the Mediterranean, Asia and Africa. Its fruit, the well known olive, is of major agricultural importance in the Mediterranean region as the source of olive oil and other products.

## Description

The olive tree is an evergreen long-lived tree or shrub. It is 2 -10 (-15) m high with open crown. The twigs are grey-green. It has smooth-grey bark when young, which becomes dark grey later. The trunk is typically gnarled and twisted. The leaves are silvery green, alternate, simple, entire, leathery, narrow elliptic or oblong in shape, 1- 6cm long and 0,5 -1,5cm wide, dull green above, silvery-green below with a petiole 3 - 7mm long. The flowers are small, whitish-greenish, in axillary racemes or panicles with two stamens. The fruit is a fleshy narrowly – ovoid drupe 1,4 x 1-2,5 cm with a black-purple colour, an oily pericarp and stony seed. It ripens from the end of October to January.

## Distribution – Habitat

Olive tree is an indigenous species of Cyprus growing in the wild in many forested areas such as Akamas, Paphos, Limassol and Stavrovouni forests, Pentadactylos , Karpasia etc. (0 – 1000 m altitude). It is also widely cultivated in all parts of the island up to an altitude of 700 m. It is one of the most valuable crop trees in Cyprus and in the Mediterranean region. It is a predominant feature of Mediterranean landscapes.

## Protection and Managment

It is the basic constituent together with the carob tree of the habitat type 9320 (Oleo-ceratonion), *Olea* and *Ceratonia forests* (Olive tree and Carob tree forests) of Annex I, of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC). A considerable number of areas on the island have been included in the Natura 2000 network. Cyprus has the obligation to apply all necessary administrative and other measures to maintain this habitat type at a favorable conservation status, which, in practical terms, means to prevent reduction of its area and quality of stands in the country.

In Cyprus, there are many very old century old olive trees, often assigned names of ambiguous origin. Such examples of ancient trees are the following:

- the Xyliatos olive tree with girth 12,80m and estimated age 800 years,
- the olive tree at Anglisides with girth 10,35m and estimated age 800 years,
- the olive tree at Avdimou with girth 8,70m and estimated age 700 years, and
- the olive tree of Zogia at Stroumbi village with girth 4,95 and estimated age 500 years.

In many parts of the island there are groups of century old trees, known as “Frankoelies”, including 43 trees at Anogyra village, 18 trees at Germasogia and 18 trees at Pano Lefkara. Following an order of the Minister of Interior, many of these groups and other isolated olive trees have been declared as protected, and the Department of Forests has the responsibility of protecting and tending them.

## Historical Elements

It is widely accepted that the olive tree, known since ancient times, originates from Eastern Mediterranean. Its existence is mentioned by Homer in “Iliad” and “Odyssey”, but also by Theophrastus and other historians. Athenians claimed that the olive tree was first grown in Athens. According to an archaic Athenian foundation myth, goddess Athena won the patron ship of the town “Athens” from god Poseidon, through the gift of an olive tree. Ancient Greeks and other civilizations, considered the olive tree as a symbol of peace, wisdom and victory. Olive oil was considered as sacred; it was used to anoint kings and athletes in ancient Greece. It has been used also in the sacred lamps of temples as well as being the “eternal flame” of the original Olympic Games. The winners used to be crowned with olive branches. Nowadays it is still used in many religious ceremonies. In our days, an olive shoot is shown on both, the United Nations flag and on the flag of the Republic Cyprus, as a symbol of peace.

## Traditional Uses

Very ornamental, but must be used with care in inhabited areas, since many people are allergic to its flowers. Very important also for wildlife since many bird species feed on its





fruits, animals eat the leaves and shoots, while dried leaves are used as incense. Olive wood is excellent for furniture structures or even as fuel. Straight shoots make good sticks. Cultivated varieties yield the well-known olive oil, and olives are an important component of the traditional diet, locally preserved in many different ways (tsakkistes, koumniastes, xydates, etc.).

Olive oil is used for food, cooking and for a multitude of therapeutic purposes. It is also used for the lighting of oil lamps in churches and the preparation of Holy Myron. It symbolizes purity, fertility, and power.

Olive tree can be used in landscaping with impressive results due to its strong sprouting, shape, leaf-color and drought resistance. It can also be pruned giving excellent shapes in parks, gardens, in churches, archaeological sites and elsewhere in groups or as an individual tree. It is propagated by seed, cuttings and root cuttings. It is sold in all governmental and private nurseries.

### Final Comments

Considering the values and features of the olive tree as described above, it can be concluded that olive tree is closely connected to our tradition, fables and history and finds innumerable uses in our life. It is therefore our obligation to give olive tree the appropriate place in nature and in our surroundings and to preserve and protect its natural habitats, with the aim to ensure that it will continue providing its benefits not only to the present but also to the future generations.



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# TREE OF THE YEAR 2012

## Olive tree *Olea europaea* L.



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