

A Brief History of Olives in Australia

The history of olive farming in Australia dates back to the early 1800's. Olives were probably first planted in groves around 1805 in Parramatta near Sydney. Olives and olive oil have been traded among the civilizations throughout the world for centuries, so it seems probable that many of the ships arriving on our shores would have carried some olive trees for planting.

All the states and territories, excluding Tasmania were planted with some varieties of olive trees during the 1800s. During this period, South Australia and Victoria were the states where most of the planting was going on and they were considered the leaders at that time. South Australia began to lead the charge of the olive industry back in the 1830s. Between 1830 and 1850 trees had come in from France, Rio de Janeiro and Sicily. One company took delivery of five varieties from Marseilles. These trees went on to produce oil which won honorable mention at the London Exhibition of 1851.

Also, the Stonyfell Olive Oil Company of South Australia won Gold Export Medals in 1911 for its oil exported to Italy. Dr Michael Burr in his book "Australian Olives" details how by 1875 there were over 3,000 trees in the parklands around Adelaide.

By 1873 there was a grove of some 10,000 trees in the foothills of the Mount Lofty ranges. Groves continued to be planted around the Adelaide area until suburban housing took over the land in the 1920s. After World War II the southern European migrants planted groves in the northern suburbs and in the Riverland area. From South Australia, olives spread across the border to Victoria. There were plantings at Dookie, Sunbury, Wangaratta and Longerenong Agricultural College near Horsham.

In 1943 a Mr Jacob Friedman started planting what is still today

the largest plantation in Australia. The plantation is located at the foot of the northern end of the Grampians near Horsham. By 1956 there were 38,000 trees in the grove. Olives were also planted at Mount Zero, Edenhope, and Dimboola. These were mostly dryland plantings but a company at Robinvale did plant 700 acres of irrigated trees and also had processing equipment on the farm. Most of these trees were pulled out in the 1970's when the Mediterranean labour and production costs were low and olive products were being imported at unbeatable prices. It is interesting to note that the current owners are looking at planting large numbers of olives on the same property.

At the New Norcia Monastery in Western Australia, olives have been growing mainly for oil since the 1860's. Dr Burr notes that the monastery's oil won a silver medal at the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908. Parliament house in Perth also has some very old trees in its front garden – some believe that they are the oldest in Australia.

Olives have been considered as a commercial industry quite a few times in Australia's history. In 1883 a paper was written under the heading "Cultural Industries for Queensland." One of the topics covered was the growing of olives in Queensland, primarily the Brisbane area. The author gives some insight into the way of thinking and the location of the nearest grove at the time in this quote from the paper.

"I think that in our early operations we shall do well to plant those kinds which have been proved by the nearest of our neighbours, (Camden Park, the estate of the late Sir W. Macarthur, in the county of Cumberland, N.S.W is the nearest locality to Brisbane where the olive has been grown to an extent sufficient for the manufacture of oil and for testing different varieties of the tree.) who have grown olives to be early and abundant bearers. After that, we may with great advantage avail of the experiences of South Australia, although with further experience we shall probably, sooner or later, select some kinds as better adapted to

our warmer climates.”

The journal concludes that “The olive has fruited well on the coast near Brisbane and gives good promise on the Darling Downs.” It is interesting to note that the penal settlement on the tiny St Helena Island in Moreton Bay had a commercial grove of olive trees early in this century. Being a self funding settlement, the prisoners had to grow much of their own food and sell produce for the purchase of other goods and equipment. One of their saleable products was olive oil which they grew and processed on the island itself. The oil was then sold to, of all places, Italy!

The average daily temperature in July for the island is approximately 16 degrees Celsius! No wonder people retire to Queensland. Things have changed dramatically since those days and we are establishing an industry under completely different circumstances than 100 years ago.

Our Anglo Saxon population is discovering what Australia’s southern European migrants knew all the time. That is, that we do have large areas of well priced land with the perfect climate to grow olives, and that olive oil is a very healthy and necessary part of our diet. The olive oil that was produced back in those pioneering days didn’t have a market (other than for medicine), and consequently the price received for the product was very low. Now the demand in this country far exceeds the supply and technology along with modern orchard practices and suitable varieties is seeing the establishment of an internationally competitive industry.

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