

# The East London Garden Society

## Plant Facts

### Olives



Olives are one of those wonders of nature that are easy to take for granted, yet deserve special attention. Technically a fruit, olives belong to the group of 'drupes' which are fruits with a pit or stone. Other drupes include peaches, mangos, cherries, nectarines, almonds and pistachios.

There are hundreds of varieties of olives, which grow on trees that are mostly native to the Mediterranean. Olive trees are remarkable in their own right as they tend to live to be several hundred years old. There is at least one record of an olive tree that is 2,000 years old.

You may also enjoy Kalamata olives, named after their city of origin Kalamata in Greece. It's possible to become quite a connoisseur of olives as each variety has its own unique flavour profile.

## **Heart Healthy Fats**

Most of the fat (more than 75 percent) in olives is oleic acid, a monounsaturated fat known for lowering your risk of heart disease.

## **Bone Health**

Consumption of olive oil and olives has been shown to prevent the loss of bone mass in animal studies of aging-related osteoporosis. Oleuropein may be responsible for this beneficial effect.

Olives come in a range of colours - bright green, yellow green, dark purple or black. Their colour is mostly a matter of preference and doesn't necessarily indicate anything about their state of ripeness or curing process. Brine-curing or lye-curing has to occur to make them more palatable. Some olives may also be dry cured (i.e. rubbed with coarse salt), which results in a wrinkled skin. Most mass-produced olives are cured with lye, as it's a much faster process. The epitome of this would be black canned olives, which are picked green and unripe, then cured in lye and treated with oxygen to turn them black.

If you want to try olives cured with salt or water, a process that takes months, look for small, artisanal brands or pick and choose from a high-quality olive bar. If purchasing from the latter, make sure the turnover rate is high and avoid any olives with a mushy texture.

Both green and black olives are good for you, but there is research that suggests the oleuropein content decreases as olives ripen. So in some cases, green olives may have more of this beneficial compound.

And remember, when you need an oil to cook with, use coconut oil instead of olive oil because it's the only one that is stable enough to resist heat-induced damage. Olive oil is excellent when used for cold dishes but cooking with it is virtually guaranteed to damage this highly heat-sensitive oil.

## **Olive Tree of Vouves**

The ancient olive tree pictured above, is located on the Greek island of Crete and is one of seven olive trees in the Mediterranean believed to be at least 2,000 to 3,000 years old. Although its exact age cannot be verified, the Olive Tree of Vouves might be the oldest among them, estimated at over 3,000 years old. It still produces olives which are highly prized. Olive trees are hardy and are resistant to drought, disease and fire which is part of the reason for their longevity and their widespread use in the region.