

Thoughts on Growing Olives

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I frequently receive inquiries about the feasibility of growing olive trees in Texas but to be honest, I am aware of nobody growing olives on a commercial scale that are making the numbers work economically.

Olives are a Mediterranean crop. We have a continental climate not a Mediterranean climate. While deciduous fruit trees set fruit buds in response to a high carbohydrate to nitrogen ratio during the previous summer, olives set flower buds in response to constant diurnal temperature fluctuation during the winter months, typical to those in the Mediterranean region. We get those conditions about one in seven years, so consistent fruiting does not happen in the Hill Country or South Texas.

Olives are quite cold sensitive. Most varieties are commonly frozen to the ground with temperatures of 15-16 deg. F. So, when olives are planted far enough north where they receive temps conducive for fruiting, the winter kill. When they are planted far enough south to not winter kill, they do not reliably set fruit buds.

Olive trees frequently start fruiting in the fifth or sixth leaf, but they mature when they are 40 years old.

Ok, sure there are olive plantings around that have had some fruit, but I believe that are none that are profitable from a strictly production point of view. I find no romance in losing propositions. If people want to plant them for ornamental value or just for aesthetic value, sure, plant them, but I think commercial plantings are not a good idea. The ONLY people making money in the olive business is the people selling olive trees or who are bottling and selling imported oil.

In addition to the above mentioned limitations olive trees are very susceptible to two soil borne pathogens- Post Oak Root Rot (*Armillaria mellea*) and Cotton Root Rot (*Phymatotricum omnivorum*).

Sorry for the less than glowing report, but it is my opinion that it is better to know the obstacles up front than after the fact. Now, I am not a popular person among the olive growing community for my position. I am not trying to rain on their parade or suppress the growth of an

industry. I had one large olive oil report to me how many gallons of olive oil they pressed this past season. Let's look at the cash flow statement and see if their revenues service the debt on investment.

Olives are a beautiful crop and I understand why they are so attractive to so many small farming operators. My only message is to do your scientific and economic homework and make your decisions wisely after due consideration.