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Yes, you can grow olive trees in Oregon; here's how: The Pecks

By The Pecks | For The Oregonian/OregonLive | Posted May 11, 2018 at 05:45 AM | Updated May 11, 2018 at 02:13 PM

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Photos by Marcia Westcott Peck/Special to The Oregonian/OregonLive

Dennis:

We've all heard the phrase "what's old is new again," right?

Well, in the case of the subject of this column, what's really, really, really old is new -- but not again -- in Oregon.

We're talking about an agricultural commodity that gets Popeye's blood boiling. And we do NOT mean spinach.

No, we're talking olives, and you know how he felt about one Olive Oyl (if you don't, he liked her. He liked her a lot).

Specifically, we're talking olive trees, which I would have sworn you could never grow in the Northwest, except that you most assuredly can.





Of course, at one point I might have argued that wine country ended at the Napa-Sonoma-Mendocino border, too, and we all know how wrong that turned out to be.

As it turns out, we have -- in the summer, at least, and particularly in the Willamette Valley -- a Mediterranean climate conducive to growing wine grapes and, previously unbeknownst to me, olive trees.

In fact, the climate is so intriguing that Oregon State University has launched a study into the feasibility of olives becoming a locally grown specialty crop.



But you don't have to wait for the results of the study, expected to take years to conclude, because we talked to Burl Mostul of Rare Plant Research, whose spectacular

Villa Catalana property is festooned with all varieties of olive trees, for the low-down on what types do well here, which ones bear bigger olives or yield more oil and which ones that, for now, you should avoid (for example, he's yet to find a non-fruit-bearing variety that can make it through an Oregon winter).

And it just so happens he will be offering olive trees for sale when his nursery has its annual sale May 19-20. An amazing coincidence, we're sure.



I love olive trees for their silvery, shimmering leaves, for their gnarled structure and for yielding my favorite liquid to dip a piece of crusty bread into, all of which I consider perfectly good reasons to have one in our garden.

Then there's Mostul's reason, which is a bit more emotional.

"They're just so cool," he said.





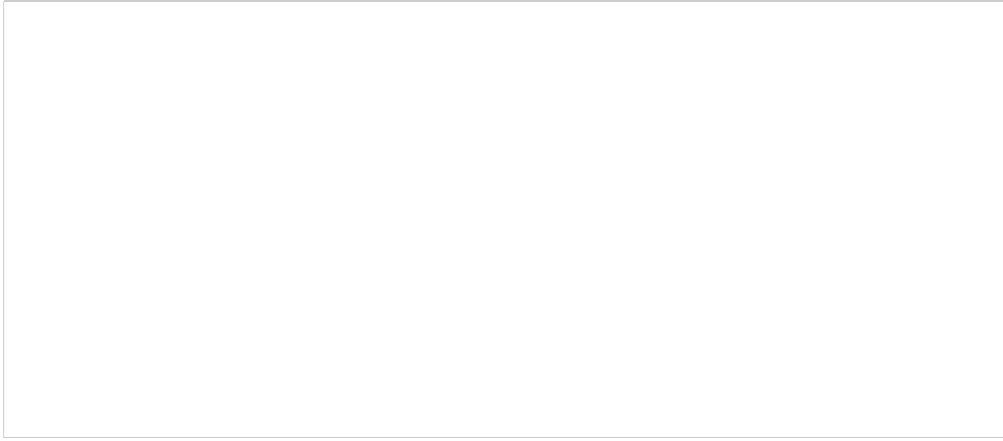
Marcia:

I can remember growing up in Southern California, where anyone who was anyone had a very expensive, old olive tree transplanted into their front courtyard as the focal point leading to their entry.

It was a status symbol. That is, until the olives dropped in a messy heap on the ground. Then, there was just a whole lot of complainin' goin' on.

And since we didn't own one (Dennis: We weren't anyone who was anyone) and I didn't have to clean up after it, I thought they were absolutely lovely. I still do.





According to Javier Fernandez-Salvador, who is the assistant professor in charge of the ongoing olive research project for OSU, they are still researching their range and general hardiness, but with a little care olive trees can be grown in Oregon, particularly in the Willamette Valley.

In fact, they are trialing 96 varieties.

He emphasizes that you should plant olive trees in spring to give their roots time to develop before winter and only plant a tree outside that has at least a 1-inch caliper trunk to give it a good start. If you start with a smaller tree, which many people do, the key, according to Mostul, is to keep it protected for the first winter (see tip No. 2).





Or, you also can keep a smaller tree in a large pot and bring it into the greenhouse during the winter until it's large enough to plant outside.

Be aware of micro-climates, such as areas vulnerable to cold winds from the gorge, and make sure when you plant your tree it has good drainage.



Fernandez-Salvador say olives may not become a cash crop in Oregon because we would have a hard time competing with California, but they will make a great small-volume, high-quality local specialty crop.

And, I might add, they look great as an ornamental tree in the landscape. They would



make a great addition to most gardens as either a focal point in a Mediterranean-inspired garden or as an edible in an urban farm setting.



Instead of an apple tree, why not grow olives? It would be a conversation starter, that's for sure.

In fact, I have seen olive trees for sale at the last four nurseries I have visited: Xera, Cornell Farms, One Green World and Rare Plant Research. They are becoming a thing!

Now, if I could only find one square inch in our garden to plant an olive tree.

They are pretty darn cool.

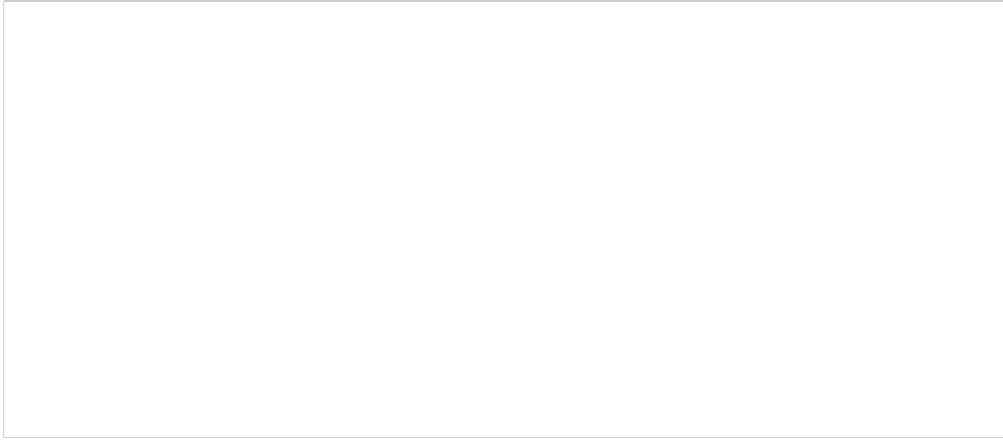




Tips

1. Fernandez-Salvador suggests you wait to plant your olive tree in the ground until the trunk is at least 1 inch in caliper.
2. Mostul, on the other hand, offers this alternative for home gardeners: If you planted your olive tree in the ground and its trunk's caliper is less than 1 inch and temperatures are expected to drop below 20 degrees and stay below freezing for the day, wrap a heavy blanket around and up the trunk for several feet.
3. Plant your tree in the spring so that its roots can develop before winter cold.





4. Olive trees can be grown in pots for years, but if the temperature drops below 20 degrees, the pot should be wrapped to prevent the roots from freezing.
5. Olive trees like good drainage. When planting, amend the soil and add pumice. Either plant your olive tree in a raised bed or mound well-draining soil in a berm above the grade. Or plant on a slope so that water can easily drain away.
6. Watch for micro-climates and freezing gorge winds.
7. One medium tree can produce several gallons of olives. Burl cures olives by soaking them in a brine solution that is changed weekly for a month or two, until the bitterness is gone.





Some promising olive trees



- Frantoio (shown)
- Leccino
- Picual
- Bouteillan
- Aglandau
- Amphisa
- Ascolano
- Grignnan

For more information on olive trees and the OSU research, you can contact Javier Fernandez-Salvador at javier.f-s@oregonstate.edu or on instagram at [javierfernandezsalvador](https://www.instagram.com/javierfernandezsalvador).



Rare Plant Research annual sale

Where: 11900 S. Criteser Road, Oregon City

When: May 19-20, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Of note: Rare Plant Research Nursery is also the location of Villa Catalana Cellars, In addition to the nursery sale, the gardens and wine tasting room will be open and a lunch buffet will be available.

--*Marcia Westcott Peck is a landscape designer (mwplandscape.com or find her on instagram at [@pecklandscape](https://www.instagram.com/pecklandscape)) and Dennis Peck is a senior editor at The Oregonian/OregonLive.*





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