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Preserving Olives - Fact Sheet

Olives have become very popular in home gardens over the last decade or 2. These tough Mediterranean plants look great in the garden with their silver foliage and drought tolerance. However if you do wish to harvest and use the fruits there are a few things you need to know. There are plenty of recipes for pickling olives. The one below comes from the Australian Olive growers and was passed on to me by one of our callers to 4GR Gardening talkback on Graham Healy's' midday show. Please let us know how it goes!



Commercial pickling processes generally use caustic soda, food acids and salt. This old fashioned recipe uses salt only.

Picking olives.

Olives can be pickled when green or black. A black olive is simply a ripe olive. Generally the green olives are used for pickling. Some black olives are pickled and pressed for oil. In about February – March some of the fruit begins to turn from plain green to purplish black. When some of the olives begin to change towards black, it will be fairly safe to pick the green olives for pickling. If the tree is large, place cloth sheets on the ground and strip the fruit from the tree with your hands or with a rake with suitably spaced prongs. Collect the fruit from the sheet, remove odd stems and leaves and rinse olives in clean water in a bucket.

Pickling process.

Place the olives on a clean stone surface or cutting board and bruise them with another stone or hammer. Alternatively, prick several times with a fork, or make three slits in the skin of each olive with a small serrated knife while turning the fruit between the thumb and index finger. This bruising, pricking or cutting will allow the water and salt to penetrate the fruit thereby drawing out the bitterness and also preserving it. This will also do away with the need to use a caustic soda solution as often used in the commercial processing of olives.

Next toss them immediately into a bucket of clean water in which one half cup of coarse or cooking salt has been dissolved into every ten cups of water. A clean plate can be placed on top to keep the olives submerged. All olives must be under the liquid. Pour the liquid away each day and replace with fresh salt water. Repeat this washing process for about 12 days for green olives and about 10 days for black (ripe) olives. The best test is to bite an olive. When the bitterness has nearly gone, the olives are ready for the final salting. As you can see, this simple recipe involves the disposal of salty rinse water into the environment. If you decide to commercially pickle olives, there are other recipes that require a longer pickling time but do not result in salty waste water.

Pour off and measure the last lot of water so you will know the volume of salt brine that will be required. Measure that quantity of fresh, warm water into a pan and dissolve the salt, this time at the rate of 1 cup of salt to 10 cups of water. Bring the salt water preserving mixture to the boil and allow to cool. Place olives in bottles and then pour the salt water brine over them until the fruit is completely submerged. Top up the bottles with up to one centimeter of olive oil to stop air getting to the fruit and seal the lids on. No further preparation is required and the bottled olives should store for at least 12 months in a cool cupboard.



Eating the olives

When you are ready to eat your olives, pour out the strong preserving solution and fill the jar with clean, cool water. Leave in the refrigerator for 24 hours and taste them. If they are still too salty for your liking, then refill the bottle with a fresh lot of water and return it to the refrigerator for a further 24 hours. (The plain water leaches some of the salt back out of the olives). At this stage you can also add any or all of the following flavourings:- grated garlic, basil, oregano, chopped onion, red capsicum, lemon juice and lemon pieces. Especially popular is a combination of garlic, basil and lemon juice.

Now sit back and enjoy the unique flavour of your own olives. You will probably never want to buy chemicalized commercial olives again

