

Growing Olives – developing a successful Kiwi formula

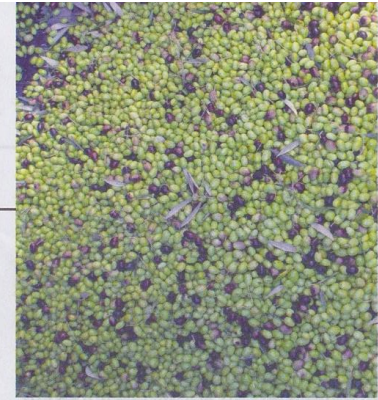
By Lynnette Third



Pruning olive trees should not be a time consuming and fiddly undertaking. Use the chainsaw to take a few big branches to let in the light but don't take more than the 30% of the overall vegetation.

A bumper harvest in our olive grove last year was quickly followed by the thrill of producing our own olive oil so we planned to hold a big olive harvesting party this season. But then we hit a snag – there were so few olives this season that we were struggling to find enough for a few hors d'oeuvres. Party cancelled and back to the drawing board.

Various enquiries indicated we weren't the only ones delivered a poor crop, so we were pleased to receive an invitation to attend the recent growers field day at Salumeria Fontana olive grove near Wellsford. The event was hosted by owner Greg Scopas, with the Napier based President of Olives New Zealand Andrew Taylor leading discussions and giving us a stern wakeup call on the state of the local industry. Andrew wasted no time telling that the 2015 harvest was indeed poor with the majority of groves yielding less than 20% of the average NZ return. And oh, the things we are doing wrong. New Zealand olive harvests are way below the yields achieved in the Northern hemisphere. Peasant farmers in Morocco are growing double our harvest per tree, others even more. Our average of 7.5 kilo of fruit harvested per tree equates to one litre of oil. The Europeans on the other hand manage an average output of 3 litres per tree. We may be thrilled with the unique flavours



Our harvest in 2014 was bountiful but this year there were almost no olives in our grove.

of Kiwi oils and the awards we win but it's obvious we have to lift our game if we are going to develop a competitive local industry. Less than 10kg of fruit harvested per tree is deemed unviable and over 20kg is desirable, so we have some catching up to do. A stark reminder that the industry is really still in its infancy here, compared to the thousands of years they have clocked up growing in the Northern hemisphere.

We were reminded how little we have in common with the growing conditions of our Mediterranean counterparts and the necessity of developing an olive production regime specifically for our region. New Zealand has some of the youngest soils on the planet in terms of the amount of time they have been exposed to human intervention. 150 years ago much of our land was still shrouded in untouched bush whereas the ancient land in the Mediterranean has been trodden over and grown in for millennia. New Zealand soils are comparably far richer and also wetter

Our gates have a new name.

Mow slopes and long grass SAFELY with the Grillo Climber

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thanks to the maritime climate of our Island Nation. Highly fertile soils and high rainfall are not desirable for olives as this tends to create excessive leaf production rather than more fruit. Then we have that impenetrable clay pan ever present in Northland subsoil which prevents root growth and causes water to pool, giving olive trees wet feet. (The fastest way to kill an olive tree is to plant it in poorly drained soil). Then the strong coastal and equinox winds arrive that can blow away the spring flowers and rip out these shallow rooted, top-heavy trees. Combine all this with high humidity which fosters disease growth on our trees, especially if our shelter belts are too enclosing, and a picture begins to emerge.

Currently Olives New Zealand has about 200 members but they would like to have 2000 and welcome anyone interested in olives to join. Local groves vary in size from 40 trees to commercial groves of

40,000 and we all have plenty to learn, hence the launch of the Focus Grove Project. This initiative is establishing four regional pilot groves utilising growing methods developed specifically for local conditions. Tellingly, active participants in the Focus Grove Project had reasonable harvests this year; most others had almost nothing.

Andrew had our attention - we were beginning to see why harvests are low and understand the need to perfect our own Kiwi recipe for higher production. Thankfully the ever-threatening rain largely held off and he wasted no time addressing our unenlightened grove management methods by treating us to a hands-on pruning demonstration in Greg's olive grove. Olives are only borne on wood grown the previous year, making the trees prone to alternate fruit bearing. Years when the harvest is large the tree lacks the resources to produce new wood resulting

in a light crop the following year and excessive shoot growth, then a corresponding high crop the following year. Avoiding these fluctuations and improving annual production is achieved by providing a balance of both new and fruiting wood and plenty of sunlight to generate flower production. I realise we have some work to do in our grove, but it doesn't sound too daunting if we follow these guidelines.

Pruning Pointers

*Don't be put off thinking complicated pruning regimes and lots of time is needed to prune effectively. Remember the "KISS" principle (keep it simple) and the 80:20 rule. 80 % of your objective will be completed in 20 % of the time so don't waste time perfecting each tree.

*Time allocated should be about one minute for each year the tree has been growing, so allow 5 minutes for a 5 year old tree. Removing a few big branches is more effective, creates fewer wounds, is more time efficient and easier to clean up than making many small cuts.

*The more leaves you remove the more vigorous the resulting vegetative growth - don't remove more than 30% of the leaves or you will sacrifice next year's fruit production.

*Maintain the structure of the tree and contain its overall size. This will make spraying and harvesting easier. Apply pruning paste and spray with fungicide within 3 days of pruning.

* Ensure light penetration and airflow inside the canopy - leaving the south side of the tree till next year when rejuvenating trees that have not been pruned for some time.

Our lessons over we concluded our day



Weighing in our 2014 harvest at Salumeria Fontana olive press.

socialising while we warmed up over refreshments which included Greg's fabulous hand-made pork sausages.

The take home message was clear - more members and investment in research and development will turn the industry into a more viable proposition for growers. New Zealand imports 4.5 million litres of olive oil annually. The industry is valued at \$35 million per year however as yet the local industry produces only 400,000 litres. There is a huge opportunity here, once we focus on our own growing conditions, to become internationally competitive. We've done it with dairy, with kiwifruit and plenty of other primary products, and we can do it with Olives. ■



The day was soggy but the assembled group were keen to learn where they might be going wrong with their grove management.



Beautiful olive oil in the making thanks to Greg Scopas of Salumeria Fontana.

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