

Saviours of the ancient olive

It is a fact, and a sad one to most, that the EU's agricultural policies are leading to the destruction of Portugal's ancient olive trees.

*Text: Jean Claude Defrance
Photos: Natura Garden Centres*

The EU agricultural policies provide incentives for the destruction of old olive trees and their replacement with the new. So Natura Garden Centres have created a new enterprise dedicated to the collection, care and sale of this most noble of trees - one of the oldest cultivated by man.

Modern life's curiosities never cease to amaze. It is a fact, and a sad one to most, that the EU's agricultural policies are leading to the destruction of Portugal's ancient olive trees. The EU pays farmers to remove or to destroy old trees, which otherwise require expensive manual labour to pick and to replace them with new, which can then be picked by machine (the machine shakes the slender trunk and causes the olives to fall - an action impossible with an older tree of sizeable girth).

To Portugal's credit, government rules require a licence for the destruction of trees, which will be granted only if replacements are planted - these licences are difficult to obtain.

Prompted both by concern at the destruction of a magnificent heritage and by the opportunity to create a new business, Natura has invested heavily in equipment, labour, transport, irrigation and infrastructure to save and to sell as many as possible of the many thousands of trees facing destruction, particularly in the Alentejo, where most commercial olive areas are to be found.

Natura estimate that over 90% of the trees in the Alentejo now being replaced are being burned, with only 10% reaching the replanting market. At the current replacement rate, Natura believe it's just a matter of a few years before the supply of older trees is totally exhausted. So the race is on to rescue and replant as many as possible.

Ironically, one short-term effect is that prices for older trees have actually fallen, thanks both to the growth in supply and to the establishment of efficient, integrated businesses such as Natura, which bring trees direct from the farmer to the buyer, whether private or commercial. A 100 year-old tree, for example, with a circumference of 0.6-1.0 metre, used to retail for around €300 little more than a year ago; now it sells for just €145.

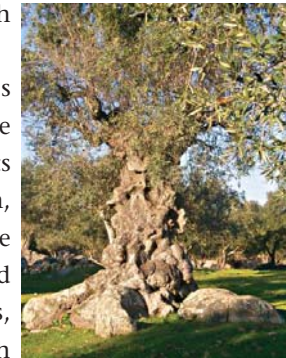
Amazingly enough, this means amongst

other things that olive trees are cheaper, size for size, than many 'exotic' equivalents, which may take a mere five years or so to grow to a good size. And, unlike exotic trees, large olive trees simply cannot be replaced once destroyed - unless you're prepared to wait for three generations! So the time will undoubtedly come when large trees command an extraordinary price premium - if any are to be found at all a few years hence.

Yet tackling this challenge is no easy matter. Negotiations must take place with farmers and prices agreed; trees must be expertly pruned before removal; large equipment to excavate and to lift the trees must be available (large trees may weigh anything up to 20 tonnes with their root and earth base); skilled labour must be trained and ready, heavy trucks and drivers on standby, and not least, a very large, properly irrigated and secure storage centre must be available within economic transport distance, and within reach of the market.

Natura has solved all of these problems with its own expert team, well trained in the care, pruning and lifting of trees, and imbued with the respect due to these ancient specimens. They have also invested heavily in specialist equipment, including an 18 tonne excavator capable of safely excavating and lifting trees weighing up to seven tonnes, which may be 500 years old, with a girth of up to six metres. Another smaller yet highly efficient '4 spade machine' can quickly lift trees of up to 100 years old.

In addition, Natura has prepared a superb two hectare site on the EN125 near Lagoa in western Algarve, directly opposite the International School, to store, preserve and to sell the trees. They will, of course,



deliver and plant customers' purchases as required (delivery is free) - the family car won't really do the job!

The new centre presents a magnificent spectacle, with its rows of massive specimens that have stood like sentinels through the ages - what stories they could tell! Particularly impressive is the view at night, when lighting creates a scene of absolute enchantment.

Given the finite supply of these wonderful trees, property owners in the Algarve are surely lucky to have an opportunity such as this, where for a limited time some of the biggest and best olive trees ever seen are available at astonishingly low prices.

The trees themselves are mainly of the cultivated variety *Olea Europea*, known as Galega in Portugal, a particularly vigorous variety from the Alentejo, with longer shoots, which also produce the best olives. Available in lesser quantities, as they tend always to be destroyed, are the wild variety *Olea Sylvestris*, known as Zambuje in Portugal, with smaller fruits that are enjoyed by birds. They also appeal to garden professionals, as they are easy to prune and good for topiary.

So long-lived is the olive tree (they can live up to 1000 or even 1500 years still bearing fruit!) that a buyer can look forward not only to a lifetime of ownership, but to a lifetime's consumption of the delicious olive - as well as the pleasure of contemplating a direct association with the ancients, for the olives are pretty much the same fruit as they were in antiquity.

Olive trees, one of man's earliest attempts at genetic engineering, are clones which are propagated by cutting off and rooting the small knobs which develop on their trunks, producing genetically identical offspring for replanting. So olives from the oldest trees are likely to be almost identical in size

and taste to those eaten and enjoyed in ancient times.

To the ancients, the olive was a mainstay in their lives; its oil was used to fuel their lamps and to protect their skin,



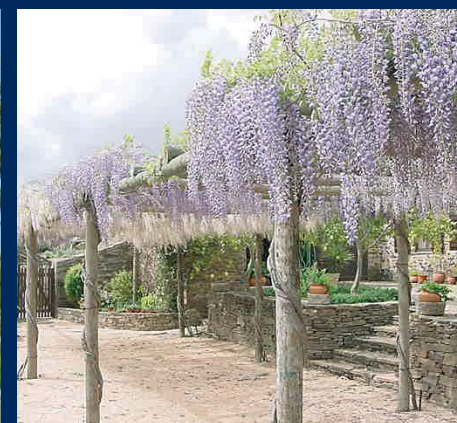
whilst both the oil and the fruit were an essential part of their diet. No surprise, then, that it makes an appearance in every ancient sacred text, in a symbolism heavily weighted to that which is fruitful, promising and positive, and that the olive tree was a symbol of peace, wisdom and triumph.

If only for the return of the great 6th century BC Athenian legislator Solon, who drafted the first law for the protection of the olive tree, in which he prohibited the cutting down of more than two trees per year in each olive grove - take note, European Commission!

If the bureaucrats cannot save and protect them, Europe's citizens surely can. This wonder of the ages, this link with the distant past, this evergreen beauty, surely deserves a place in every garden. ■



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