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The Future Looks Bright for Georgia Olives



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The Future Looks Bright for Olives in Georgia

By LeeAnna Tatum

When you think of olive trees, you probably think of places like Italy and Spain or further east to Israel and Palestine. Old World countries with centuriesold olive trees and a thousand years of agricultural history behind each new harvest.

But what about right here in Georgia?

Located along the same latitudinal lines on the globe, The Southern United States does provide a similar climate as the Mediterranean. But what else do olive trees need to thrive? They are thirsty plants that require a good deal of water but are picky about having moisture left around their roots.

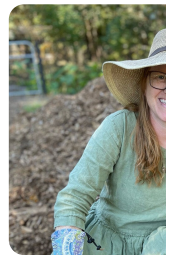
mix of clay, sand and loam. Olive trees can do exceptionally well in these pockets of perfection - acres of just-right sandy soil can support thriving olive groves while just a few feet away, the trees would struggle to stay alive.

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But growers in the know with access to these Goldilocks' lands are growing the business of olive farming in Georgia and producing some of the world's best olive oils!

Olive trees are not new to Georgia, they were most likely first introduced to Coastal Georgia by early Spanish settlers in the 1500s. Though those colonies did not last, British settlers who came along nearly 200 years later found olive trees growing on Saint Simons.

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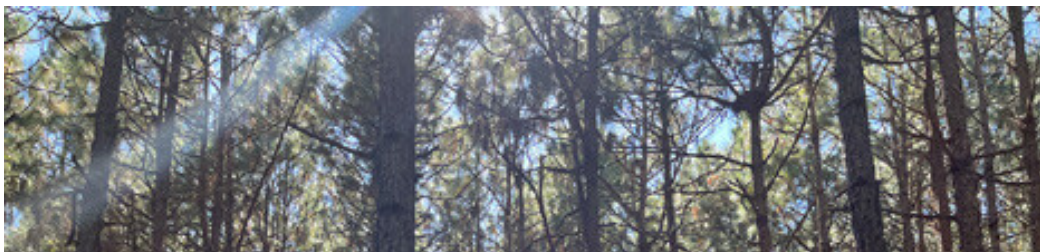
Nathaniel Green, who owned Cumberland Island at the time, also found existing olive trees and worked with Thomas Jefferson to have even more trees brought over from Europe. With several prominent figures promoting olive and olive oil production in the South, the industry grew leading up to the Civil War.

The War essentially brought an end to the fledgling industry - at least for a time. In 2009, with the establishment of Georgia Olive Farms and the Georgia Olive Growers Association, olive oil production was given new life here in Georgia.

I recently spent a few delightful hours with owners Curtis and Tracy Poling of Woodpecker Trail Olive Farm near Glennville in Tattnall County and I have to admit that I never knew olive oil could be so fun.



Tracy is the 6th generation of her family to farm the land where they currently live and farm, though she is definitely the first generation to grow olives! Previous generations had raised cattle and grown row crops, but mostly the land has been used consistently through the years to grow pine trees.





When the Polings decided to move from their home near the Coast to the home and property that Tracy had inherited, they were interested in using the land for something other than growing pines and began researching some alternatives. Curtis knew that olives were being grown successfully in the Southern part of the State and was also familiar with the history of olive trees in early America, so he thought olives might be a viable option for their land.

Neither Tracy or Curtis have experience farming, but they both come from farming families. “When I was a kid, my grandfather decided to buy a farm. And so as a teenager, I actually drove tractors and baled hay ... and knew that I’d never be a farmer,” Curtis said ironically.

After extensive research and traveling the country to see other working olive farms, Curtis determined that not only could their land be ideal for growing olives but he felt that he could do it well and produce a quality product.

Woodpecker Trail Olive Farm consists of 300 acres and is home to about 9,000 olive trees. The trees are from all over the world, including some that are genetically related to the trees originally sourced by Thomas Jefferson himself.

Since their first harvest and pressing, the Polings have been producing internationally recognized and award-winning olive oil. They are committed to environmentally-friendly practices on the farm and harvest the olives by hand to protect the integrity of the trees.

Woodpecker Trail Olive Farm is also home to longleaf pines and the many species of animals that thrive amongst the pine trees. Tours are available and the Polings are working toward making their farm more accessible to the public for tours, tastings and shopping.

Georgia’s long and fruitful connection with the olive tree is significant and an important part of history! But even more importantly, the olive oil industry is ripe for development in Georgia today and the future looks bright!

Along with its many culinary uses, olive oil is also renowned for its health benefits and uses in skin and hair care treatments. No matter where in South Georgia you call home, you’re likely to find a local source near you for this indispensable pantry item.





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