

Texas producers find new oil fields—olive groves

September 9 2014, by Kathleen Phillips



Curtis Mickan stands near the olive oil press on the Central Texas Olive Ranch he owns near Georgetown. Credit: Kathleen Phillips

Texas has been known for its oil production for almost 150 years. Now, a new oil industry is sprouting in what may bring producers cash and consumers a local, edible choice—olive oil.

Olive trees, native to the Mediterranean region, have been documented on almost 800 acres in the state and many affiliated with the new industry believe the acreage is closer to 2,000, according to Texas A&M

AgriLife Extension Service horticulturists.

For some growers, the new crop represents a niche that can be marketed to a consumer base that is seeking healthy foods produced locally.

For Curtis Mickan, olive trees are a viable way to keep the 140-plus-year-old Williamson County farm in his family.

"When I got ready to retire and my wife and I were talking about the future, I said if something happens to you and me, our grandkids will not be able to pay for the taxes on this farm," Mickan said. "Growing wheat and corn on it wouldn't pay. So I started making a study on what would be the best use of this land."

He narrowed the choices to having a vineyard or an olive orchard. His research had also determined that the U.S. is the third largest consumer of olive oil in the world, and most of the nation's crop is in California.

"I knew the olive industry was a new thing for Texas, because there weren't any as far north as Georgetown," Mickan said of his decision, which coincided with his grandson Josh Swafford's December 2008 graduation from Texas A&M University with a bachelor's in agriculture. The pair broke ground for their Central Texas Olive Ranch in January 2009.

"At some point, you need to contribute to society, and my goal here was to produce something that the neighboring farmers can get involved in if they want to," Mickan said.

He built a building and bought an oil press from Italy knowing that not everyone who wants to grow olives will be able to buy a press.

"So if someone wants to grow 10 or 15 acres, we'll buy their fruit from

them so that would be a productive thing for them and for us," Mickan said. "The more olives we get to harvest and press, the better we are in the industry.

"Most of the pitfalls we've had the opportunity and challenge to overcome. If someone asks us 'what do I do now?,' we could probably tell them because we've been there, done that," Mickan said.

At a recent field day at Mickan's 33-acre olive grove, AgriLife Extension horticulturists discussed the likely challenges in olive production for about 80 attendants.

Chief among the challenges is climate, according to Monte Nesbitt, AgriLife Extension horticulturist based in College Station.

"Olives are a Mediterranean crop. The severe, occasional freezes we get in Texas can be a problem," Nesbitt said.

He said many people have expressed interest in olive production either for a small acreage or a larger commercial operation, so he has teamed with fellow AgriLife Extension horticulturists Drs. Larry Stein of Uvalde and Jim Kamas of Fredericksburg to determine the best growing conditions, soil types, varieties and fertility needs.

"We've got a lot of questions and we have a lot of interest and energy, so we expect to learn a lot in the next couple of years," he said.

This isn't the first time Texas growers have eyed olive trees. Texas A&M AgriLife Research scientist Earnest Mortensen studied his [olive tree](#) planting in the Carrizo Springs area in the 1930s. Some of his trees still survive. Another resurgence of interest took place in the 1970s and 1980s. The most recent and long-standing effort to produce olives began in the late 1990s, Nesbitt said, and included the establishment of the

Texas Olive Oil Council in 1994.

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Agriculture census had no record of olive production in Texas, Nesbitt noted. The 2012 census recorded [760 acres](#) of olives in the state.

"We think there is probably double that," he said. "And there are lots of new plantings going in as well."

The main lesson from previous plantings, Nesbitt said, is that olive trees are limited most by climate. They begin to grow when temperatures reach about 70 degrees in the spring, but they only set fruit after experiencing night temperatures of 35-50 degrees followed by less than 80 degree daytime temperatures.



Monte Nesbitt, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service horticulture specialist, examines an olive tree in Central Texas. Credit: Kathleen Phillips

Swafford noted that their acreage suffered a debilitating freeze in March that reduced the trees to tumbleweed look-alikes. Fortunately, most of the trees recovered and grew so much that he pruned them severely in order to encourage olive development.

His olive trees grow in a high-density planting method and a drip irrigation system. With a variety of soils on the land and so many rocks that he suggests visitors take one with them, Swafford said caliche has yielded the best growth thus far.

Kamas said those interested in growing olives must keep weeds out of the orchard.

"What do weeds compete for? Light, nutrients and water," he said.

"Weed control is critical for the establishment of any perennial crop."

Cotton root rot, a long-established disease in much of the state, has been a problem for young trees, according to Stein.

He said another challenge to consider is how to grow the trees in terms of how many per acre, what varieties to plant and how they will be harvested.

"You have to work out the numbers for you," Stein told the field day attendees. "Some of you may want an acre of trees, some of you may want 10 trees."

Stein said AgriLife Extension will be planting numerous trials in 2015 to help research the best practices for olive growing in Texas, which will give guidance for prospective growers.

"I'm grateful that I'm here to witness it. You never know when you start one of these things how long it's going to take to develop," Mican said

of his orchard and the industry. "But we're pleased. We knew there would be some difficulties. Every time you turn, there's a challenge. But we've met those challenges and hopefully next year we'll start having a fairly decent crop. The trees are five years old and and between five and seven years is when they start producing really good crops. I'm looking forward to that."

Provided by Texas A&M University

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