

V101 - Olives in AZ - AL

One of the first pieces of Arizona trivia you learn is probably the 5 C's.

music cue

Cotton, cattle, climate, copper, and citrus. These have been the driving forces of Arizona's economy for generations. Flora and fauna and industries that do very well in our arid desert.

While the 5 C's won't quickly become the 5 C's and an O, there is another overlooked product that has nonetheless taken root here.

music pause

Olives.

music back up

Now, while we're not the beautiful Greek, Spanish or Italian countryside that you might imagine when thinking of olives, their trees grow very well here. And this piqued one listener's interest when they submitted this question:

"I hear you guys can grow olives here. Isn't it too hot? How is that even possible?"

A valid question. After all, Arizona doesn't immediately give off agricultural vibes. But olives have been growing in Arizona before we were even a state.

Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast by the Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. I'm producer Amanda Luberto and today I'm diving into the briney world of olives to explore how they can grow in our dry air and how a family farm in the east valley has made them famous.

music up to fade

I am a self-proclaimed olive lover. I always have been. My parents tell a story that a babysitter once let me eat a whole jar of olives when I was five years old. And while that probably wasn't good for my developing body, it cemented a love for the salty treat.

Like I said, I understand where our listener is coming from. I also wouldn't have associated Arizona with olives because of the heat. But apparently it's actually...perfect!

Tanya Quist from the University of Arizona tells me more.

[00:06:39] **Tanya:** The kind of assessed the climate in the Mediterranean and thought that the average temperature, maybe the

average precipitation annual precipitation with similar. And then extrapolated that those plants would do well here. As it turns out, plants in the Mediterranean receive most of that precipitation in the winter, whereas we receive most of our precipitation in the summer. And you think, ~~you know~~, the average precipitation would be looks like the plants can't distinguish it, but in fact those plants do better when they receive moisture during a warm climate or during a warm season or during the cool season. So I think they're generally very well adapted that they're drought tolerant. They also are able to tolerate the extreme cold temperatures that we have in the desert, and obviously they're pretty well adapted to those super high temperatures, too, as well as high light. So a lot of those big environmental factors that generally dictate whether a plant can survive or not are pretty similar in those here and in the Mediterranean where the olives originate [00:07:49][70.0]

The "he" that Tanya is referring to is Dr. Robert Forbes. He was the first head of the Agriculture Experiment Station on U of A's campus in the 1890s. The mission was to deduce what types of plants and crops would grow best in certain areas of the country.

For perspective, Tanya said that he was doing this about a century before the field of ecology was even an established thing.

[00:06:21] **Tanya:** So the fact that he had some idea that what happened in other places in the world could be replicated here, you know, that we didn't even know that that was a similar ecological system [00:06:36][14.9]

According to a speech he made in 1934, Dr. Forbes planted the olive trees on the University of Arizona campus in 1895 using trees from Santa Barbara. Ones that were planted in front of the girls dormitories at the time, he claimed to have planted a little later.

Tanya is currently the director of the University's campus arboretum.

[00:02:23] **Tanya:** an arboretum is a collection of woody plants that are set aside for research and education. And in this case, the campus arboretum is an arboretum collection of trees and shrubs that are housed on the main campus within the university grounds. So the idea is that it provides support for educating people about arid landscapes, what trees and what shrubs are appropriate here. And because it's a cooperative extension program, the idea is that we are extending university expertise and research out into the community and that we're we're supporting research not just in Arizona but throughout the world. [00:03:08][44.5]

The U of A is a land grant school, meaning the school's goals are research, education, and outreach.

[00:04:01] **Tanya:** the outreach component essentially means that our research has to be relevant in solving problems to the state of Arizona, and our education has to be extended out. So because we're a land grant school, our research programs in the early years focused on a problem for the state. In fact, we weren't even a state, we were territory. And that was what are we going to grow here? How are we going to have like an agricultural base for our economy?

[00:04:30] [28.9]

So the first faculty members of the U of A, including Dr. Forbes, were tasked with finding and researching plants of potential economic value. Greenery that would grow well here and sprout something worth selling.

They collected plants from all around the world and brought them back to the arboretum to study. By planting them around campus, the faculty members were able to study things like how well these plants did in our harsh climates and what responded well with our soils.

The successful ones were introduced into the trade as commodity crops.

Going back to the 5 Cs, citrus and cotton became clear winners, but olives from Italy, Spain and California also thrived here.

music break

Not only was it Dr. Forbes' quest to find what crops could be financially valuable to trade here in Arizona, but he wanted to create a beautiful campus that was just opening its doors in 1891.

[00:08:45] **Tanya:** He also recognized that planting trees is something that establishes something that's like more nourishing for the community than just providing food. So he actually lined out the perimeter of the streets surrounding the campus in rows that would be typical of ~~like~~ a formal garden and in Europe. So they weren't just, you know, like a research plot where you just scatter plants throughout. It was like very formal arrangement of trees surrounding the campus. [00:09:20] [35.5]

Now, the question of how many types of olives are grown on the U of A campus is a little up for debate. One document indicated 12 varieties... however the campus arboretum only has 4 in their database. But there are some non-fruiting cultivations as well, so she estimates the variety of *TREES* is close to 10.

pause or music break or something

You might be thinking the same thing I did when I was talking with Tanya: can I eat these? Can I walk around the Tucson campus and snack on some fresh olives?

Technically yes.

Like I said, not all of the trees produce fruit – this is because the pollen can be highly allergenic. But the ones that do are definitely edible.

To an untrained eye, you might not know which ones are ripe or ready to eat. And if you pick the wrong one, like Tanya did when she first got here from Canada, it can be a bitter surprise.

[00:11:24] **Tanya:** for me to see an olive tree was like, I don't know, it was like so exotic and so amazing. And you may even look like you could eat them right off the tree. They look like beautiful grapes, which I did and learned that there I was really like astringent, would dry out your mouth. It's so horrible. [00:11:41][17.2]

music cue

The olive trees on the University of Arizona campus are among the oldest trees in Tucson. Dr. Forbes didn't quite outlive his plants, but he did live a robust 103 years and continued to be involved in the ecology and research until his final days.

Even in the Valley, olive trees are grouped into some of the oldest trees planted here. Particularly in Scottsdale.

[00:00:19] **Bill:** my name is Bill Murphy and I am the assistant city manager here at the City of Scottsdale. [00:00:24][4.9]

[00:00:30] **Bill:** we have some of the original olives that Winfield Scott got planted here, and they are on Drinkwater Boulevard between Second Street and Osborn to the South. And we have also some that are on the second street as you come west of Drinkwater Boulevard, right in front of the Scottsdale Center for the Arts [00:00:52][21.7]

Winfield Scott is the founder and namesake of Scottsdale, and in 1896 he had the same idea as Dr. Forbes. He planted olive trees in Arizona.

[00:01:07] **Bill:** So the history of the olives that the Chaplain, Winfield Scott, started back in 1896 when he bought 640 acres of land, which would be what is considered old town right now. And he was growing citrus, as well as just a regular farm with various other things. He used the olives for as a windbreak around that grove of the the orange trees. And so that those trees that I just described

to you where they're at, those are the original trees that he planted many, many years ago. [00:01:49][41.5]

These trees were planted to protect the orange trees in Scottsdale. Sort of like an edible fence. But not long after they were planted in the late 1890s, a drought wiped out the orange trees. The mighty olive stood strong though.

music

One olive tree in particular is distinctly special.

[00:01:50] **Bill:** There is one of the trees we have marked on Second Street, the area I mentioned that's just west of Drinkwater as a witness tree. And that was given to us on Arbor Day a few years ago by the Arizona Community Tree Council [00:02:07][16.8]

And what is a witness tree?

[00:10:43] **Bill:** So there was a this the Arbor Day Foundation came up with the trees that were over 100 years old that were, you know, would be trees that if they could actually speak to us, they would actually be able to tell you what went on. So as I mentioned to you, these trees initially were planted in 1896. So you figure those are some very small little trees and they were watered and cured. And so here we are in 2022. It's quite a while ago. And so to still have them viable and still being know, doing well out there in the landscape is kind of an accomplishment. [00:11:23][40.4]

Essentially, it's a tree that's been witness to our history. It's a witness tree.

Bill told me that there are some trees up North that are designated witness trees as well and each year on Arbor Day, you can submit a tree down at the state Capitol to be a witness tree.

let music play a little more

We're going to take a short break...

KM ap read

Now, when talking about olives in Arizona I'm sure many long time residents have been screaming at their podcast app:

When is she going to talk about the Queen Creek Olive Mill??

And you'd be right. This podcast wouldn't be complete without mentioning the only producer of extra virgin olive oil in the state.

[00:00:22] **John:** My name is John Rea, and I am the director of marketing. [00:00:25][2.7]

John is the director of marketing at the Queen Creek Olive Mill, but he is also the youngest member of the Rea family who own the mill.

The story starts back about 20 years ago.

[00:00:40] **John:** my parents moved here from Detroit. My dad was in the automotive industry and he wanted to do something different in his life. And he came to visit Arizona with my with my mom. And they saw that there's a lot of olive trees growing actually in Old Town Scottsdale. And that's what made them realize that olive trees can grow well here [00:01:02][21.8]

The same olive trees Bill told us about earlier!

[00:01:02] **John:** being from a very Italian background. My dad loves olive oil, knows I already knew everything about it. My his father was always was doing things in the garden and growing things. I had a green thumb. And so my dad and my mom kind of kept on their mind that olives grow here really well. And they went back to Detroit. And ~~the story is that~~ I wasn't born yet, but the story is that they were talking one night in an old Irish bar and said, You know what? Why don't we go to Arizona and grow olive trees and see what we can do with that? Um, and a few months later, they, they did that, uh, they moved when I, when my mom was pregnant with me, um, and was kind of searching around a good spot to grow these olive trees in the valley area and eventually landed on Queen Creek [00:01:59][56.7]

The rest from there is history. Queen Creek is still a developing area of the greater Valley, but back then, even more so. It was an easy spot to grab 100 acres of land to start growing olives on.

Because these olive trees, unlike the ones in Tucson or Scottsdale, were specifically made for growing and harvesting fruit, Perry Rea, the owner of the olive mill and John's father, experimented with different types of trees until landing on what they grow now.

[00:03:07] **John:** so we landed on koroneiki, which is a Greek variety in arbosana which is a Spanish variety. Um, and we heavily plant those ones as our, our newest grove, our baby groves that we planted about two and a half years ago. So it should start yielding fruit in the next year or so that we'll be able to nail into olive oil here. [00:03:28][21.2]

Because the mill is far from central phoenix, about 45 minutes ~~toward~~ the East, John said customers would finish their shopping and ask where a good place for lunch is. So the Rea family opened a restaurant on their mill using their own products as well as some from other local vendors.

Now, the mill is about 53 acres instead of 100, but it boasts a full service restaurant, a market to buy their products, a spa, and multiple event spaces for private parties and even weddings.

And asking John what kinds of olive products they sell is reminiscent of Bubba listing off shrimps in Forrest Gump.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rT5fYMfEUc&ab_channel=Movieclips

They've got olives, olive oil, stuffed olives, flavored olive oils, olive spreads, olive oil lotions, etc etc. If it can contain olives or olive oils, chances are the Queen Creek Olive Mill has made it for you.

music

So what's the difference between types of olive oils? Should I be able to tell my robusts from my delicates? People who taste and define types of oils are called sommeliers, just like in wine. They're able to differentiate the flavor profiles and identify what you should use for what dishes.

[00:05:45] **John:** We have three profiles which is delicate, balanced and robust. So our delicate will be more of a buttery kind of softer flavor, whereas our profile, whereas the balance would be kind of a mix between the exact it's actually exactly a mix between the delicate and the robust. And I'll explain what the robust is. That's a it's a heartier, it's more pungent. You'll taste it more. It's not spice, but you'll think it might be spice when you get it in your throat. Um, but it robust is generally what is used for, um, high quality chefs. If they want, if they want a really good olive oil, they'll go for a more robust olive oil generally has more polyphenols and more health attributes to it, I guess you would say. Um, and then whether the delicate can be even just a replacement for like butter or something. [00:06:45] [59.4]

For the flavored olive oils, there are three methods: cold pressed, infusion and co-pressed. For co-pressed oils, they put the flavor agent – jalapenos for example – in with the olives and press it in the machine. For infusions, similar to tea, they let the flavors soak in the oil. And for cold pressed, they take oil – oil from a lemon for example – and mix it with the olive oil.

The different methods allow for the different flavors to really shine.

nat sound of walking out to the groves

[00:00:17] **Amanda:** When it's like olive harvest. [00:00:18][1.1]

[00:00:19] **John:** So that'll be starting mid-November. It depends on the year, obviously, but it usually will be mid-November to, uh, January ish, early January. Okay. Um, and some, some at some point in that, in that range. Now we're a little bit later than California because the weather, uh, we have to wait until the weather's right and like, there's no rain. Sometimes we have to get delayed because if there's some rain that happens, we can't go through with our machine. Um, if there's rain. So, but, yeah, generally during that time. [00:00:51][31.7]

[32.8]

John walked me out to one of their newer groves to show me around. The baby grove as he referred to it earlier. The trees were planted in rows like you'd imagine any crop and if you got up close to the leaves, you could start to see the olives growing.

The grove has about 4 and a half thousand trees and it takes about 2 weeks to harvest all of the fruits. And for the record, when I say fruit, I mean olives.

Something that visitors of the Queen Creek Olive Mill can do is take a tour of the grounds. Now for the protection of the olives, you can't go into the groves exactly.

But they'll show you around some of the grounds, walk you through the process of crushing up the whole olive to extract the oils, and even do a tasting class on a few of their more popular sellers.

fade in

[00:11:05] **Speaker 1:** Was it peppery? [00:11:06][1.0]

[00:11:07] **Speaker 2:** Like, I was like what it feels like. And when you swallow it, I think it feels a little peppery. But. But I feel like it was a little brassy. Oh, yeah. No, no, no. I definitely I think it's the little grassy area is like a mix. [00:11:21][13.3]

[14.3]

fade out

While I don't think Arizona will be adding an "o" to our 5 C's, olives have claimed their own robust history in our state.

Olive trees have been blossoming in Arizona before Arizona was named Arizona! They're easy to access and with the mill, they're easy to enjoy.

theme music up

Thank you so much for listening to this week's episode of Valley 101. Are you a fan of olives? Let us know on twitter @ a z c podcasts.

And if this episode influenced you to maybe plant an olive tree of your own, Valley 101 suggests doing some research beforehand. Some trees are prohibited because they're highly allergenic.

And all three of my guests warned me that caring for an olive tree is not an easy task. They produce a lot of fruit and it can be very messy.

If you have any questions about metro Phoenix, please submit them to our podcast by visiting valley 101 dot azcentral dot com.

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I'm producer Amanda Luberto, thank you again for listening. We'll see you next week.