Olive Trees - Żebbuġ

Olive trees are evergreen trees found in most Mediterranean countries. A very long time ago the olive trees grew all over Malta and the olives and olive oil acquired from them, used to be exported to other countries. Evidence of this are places in Malta like Ħaż-Żebbuġ, Ghajn Żejtuna, Birżebbuġa and Iż-Żejtun, which got their name from this particular tree, because it used to grow abundantly in that area, as well as the many huge stone presses found in various places mostly with a connection to the Roman period. The Roman villa at San Pawl Milqi in Burmarrad is probably the best example of a Roman olive oil-producing estate. Unfortunately with time most of the old olive trees in Malta were destroyed, either cut down to be used as fire wood or to make way for other kinds of agricultural produce, including wheat and later cotton.

Today the olive tree is being cultivated again in many areas around Malta and is reclaiming its place in Maltese agriculture and landscape. Most of these olive trees are imported from Italy, Spain and Greece where the olive oil industry is well established.

Olive trees can be grown in all types of soil, as long as the soil is at least three metres deep. These trees need plenty of sunshine to produce olives and are therefore ideal for our Maltese climate. The olive tree is very tenacious and can live for up to 500 years. Its leaves are dark green on top and greyish underneath and are usually replaced every three years, falling mostly in spring.

The tree produces small, fragrant, cream-coloured flowers. The olive tree produces two kinds of flowers: a perfect flower containing both male and female parts, and a flower with stamens only. The flowers are largely wind pollinated and most olive varieties are self-pollinating. Some varieties though, are self-incompatible and need to be cross-
pollinated by other varieties of olive trees found in the vicinity.

*Olive tree flowers*

The olive fruit is usually ripe by October. It is green, becoming generally blackish-purple when fully ripe. A few varieties are green when ripe and some turn a shade of copper brown. The different varieties differ in size, shape, oil-content and flavour. Raw olives contain an alkaloid that makes them bitter and unpalatable and therefore need to be placed in salted water for several days, before they are good to eat. Many varieties of olive trees are grown solely for the production of olive oil. An olive tree usually bears fruit when it is at least 4 years old.

*Ripening olives*