

Winter focus: Olive Leaf

Just the basics

- Olive leaf extract contains extremely powerful antioxidant compounds. When made from fresh leaves, it can have antioxidant effects that are five times more powerful than vitamin C and up to a remarkable 28 times more powerful than noni juice.
- The best olive leaf extract is made from freshly harvested leaves, not from dried leaves.
- Olive leaf has been used in traditional western herbal medicine to provide relief from fevers.
- Unlike some herbs, where conventional medicine can often be sceptical of health benefits, beneficial properties of olive products are well recognised and almost universally respected.

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Ah, the amazing olive! Whether or not you enjoy the taste of olives themselves, you have undoubtedly enjoyed many other products of the remarkable olive tree – especially the many that are derived from olive oil. From soaps to salad dressings, olive trees offer many natural gifts; you may even have sat on furniture made from olive wood! One product of the olive tree is very valuable, but not at all well known: the medicinal olive leaf.

The background info

The cultivation of olive trees is becoming a major industry in Australia, and one that is bearing significant economic fruit. Evergreen, hardy, and well suited to relatively harsh environments, olive trees thrive in Australian conditions. In fact, they are so well suited to our climate that it is remarkable that they have taken so long to become a widespread crop.

Tradition dictates that olive trees should be planted only in coastal areas, but modern experience does not fully support this idea; nowadays, many olive plantations can be found in inland areas and some of Australia's largest olive farms can be found some distance from the sea.

That's just one of many traditions surrounding olive trees, though. There are many more, because the olive tree has been a part of human history as far back as we can see. There are references to it in the Bible and in Greek legends, and clear evidence of the use of olives can be found in Egyptian tombs. Olives and olive products were staples of Roman society. Romans, for example, had no soap, and instead applied olive oil to their skin

then removed it with a spatula, thus taking away dirt along with the oil – a method that is said to yield surprisingly good cleansing results! Olive trees are rich in symbolism, too – for example, we still speak of “extending an olive branch” as a peace offering, referring to a symbolic meaning of this plant that is so ancient we cannot pinpoint its exact origins.

Although it's the leaf of the olive tree that is most highly regarded as a herbal medicine for winter, it's worth giving a moment's thought to the innumerable uses of olive oil, perhaps the most widely used of all olive products. Olive oil is used in cooking, in soap, in cosmetics, and in pharmaceutical products. It can even be burned in old-fashioned lamps!

Botanically speaking, olive trees are members of the Oleaceae family, which also includes lilacs, jasmine, forsythia, and privet bushes. Some are distinctly similar to olive trees; if you look closely, you may find that the leaves of an ash tree are quite similar to those of an olive tree. Olives don't have too many native Australian relatives, but there are in fact a couple of Aussie Oleaceae – including, appropriately enough, a group of trees commonly known as mock olives.

How to take it

Olive leaf tea is still available, though it's not on every supermarket shelf. It has a rather strong taste that won't suit everyone, but it can be an economical way to get the medicinal benefits of the olive leaf. Indeed, if you know of an olive tree growing in your area, you may be able to trim a few leaves from it and make your own tea.

More commonly, olive leaf is taken in the form of a natural extract, sometimes with other ingredients to improve the flavour or to provide additional health benefits.