

Biodynamic Olives at Mt Zero



Beautiful, vibrant olive tree, Mt Zero Olives

Neil and Jane Seymour bought their 200 acre olive grove on the north west edge of the Grampians range (western Victoria) in 1994. They produce only high quality, Demeter certified Bio-dynamic extra-virgin olive oil, which is sold all around Australia, as well as from their on-farm shop.

The olive grove was originally part of a much larger plantation started in the 1950s. Then, Jacob Friedman, a businessman from Horsham started the Verdalian Company to develop an olive industry in Australia. On his board were many influential people such as the Australian Commissioner for Taxation, and investment came from all over Australia.

The company bought, cleared and developed large areas of land near the Grampians, at Dimboola, and at Edenhope. Sadly, the enterprise failed as there was then not enough demand for olives and olive products - the waves of post-war migrants from Italy and Greece had not yet become established enough to support the industry.

However, most of the olive groves survived, many in a neglected state, and when Neil and Jane arrived, their olives were almost beyond redemption. Neil worked very hard, pruning (with a chainsaw!) trees which had become huge, multi-stemmed and unproductive, and gradually returning them to productivity. Some trees had as many as 25 trunks – olives naturally produce many suckers which have to be pruned off each year, leaving between one and three trunks.

The olives were originally planted around 1953 at the traditional spacing for dry-land olives in Europe, ten metres. Neil believes that, had they been planted closer, they would struggle to survive, especially given the current drought, which has so far gone on for six years! Olives have a very extensive root system, with thick roots well away from the trees. The trees were planted on raised rows running downhill, for better drainage. Even though the soil is very deep sand (up to 25 feet!), during winter the water table can come to within 2 feet of the surface. Olives require excellent drainage, and the raised rows provide the surface roots with better conditions.



Neil Seymour in the on-farm shop

Around each tree is a pronounced raised mound – this is because the trees develop a very large “potato” under the trunk (underground). This acts as a storage body and also has thousands of sucker buds on it.

During very dry spells, the olive leaves fold up, opening up and regaining colour with rain. When I visited, the leaves were semi-folded in dry conditions, and the trees not at their best, but showing beautiful, lively, upright form, reminiscent of Van Gogh’s paintings of olive trees.

Neil tested the soil when they first arrived, finding it to be deficient in almost everything. The testing company recommended large amounts of trace elements, but Alex Podolinsky suggested much smaller rates. Neil bought a load of composted, pelletized fertilizer and got the supplier to incorporate the trace elements that were lacking. Since 1994, Neil hasn’t felt the need for any inputs, though he thinks the trees probably need a bit more nitrogen, and is trying to increase the legume content of the pasture to achieve this. A return to normal rainfall patterns would greatly assist in this process.

The grass under the olives is basically whatever grows naturally. When they first came they sowed a variety of grasses and clovers, but drought and kangaroos stopped them properly establishing. Now it is mostly native grasses, South African Veldt grass and Hare’s-foot clover, which appears in late winter and disappears again in summer. Neil built a kangaroo fence (see photo) and will try sowing more grasses when the drought ends. The fence can be lifted up to let kangaroos in or out – Neil is considering using the kangaroos in spring to graze the grass instead of slashing.

Neil normally sprays prepared 500 twice a year, sometimes only once a year when it has been too dry during the drought. The autumn spray is normally put out anytime from April to June, depending when the rains come. The 500 has changed the soil colour from the original yellow to a very dark grey, and the humus content has increased considerably. In this low rainfall

area, the more humus Neil can develop with 500 and good management, the more moisture the soil will hold.



“Olive Plantation”, Vincent Van Gogh, 1889



Neil and Jane’s BD olives



Neighbour’s conventional olives

Pruning and General Management

Each year the olive trees must be pruned to stimulate new growth and to keep them at a reasonable size so they can cope with dry conditions. Olives bear on one to two year old wood so they have to be pruned to keep them vigorous and productive. Also the annual growth of suckers must be pruned off. Prunings are left on the ground until all the leaves have dropped off and then



The Grampians Range provides a beautiful backdrop

removed. Pruning cuts are never painted, and no problems result. Neil finds summer pruning good.

Neil paints the bark periodically with a liquefied lime - this rejuvenates the bark, making it smooth and healthy, and is good for the overall health of the tree. He learnt this trick from Greek friends - it is a traditional technique in Europe. He uses builder's lime mixed to a slurry with water and brushed on.

One of the on-going problems in the olive grove is regrowth of wattle and tea-tree. Neil slashes, but feels that the application of lime or dolomite may be a better alternative - tea-trees prefer acid soils. Olives like alkaline soils, so lime application will not do them any harm.



Pruning of suckers is an ongoing job

Pests and Diseases

The olive trees suffer very few problems. For scale, Neil prunes off the worst branches and opens up the tree to more sunlight. Young scale insects don't like exposure to hot air, so opening up the tree to more air flow in summer helps. Keeping the bark smooth and healthy also helps. Neil has never used white oil - it causes more problems than it solves because it "glugs up" the leaves.

The olive lace bug, a native insect which has adapted to olives, is present in the area - when they arrived in 1993, many parts of the grove were completely defoliated by

it! Fortunately, it has progressively disappeared. Neil feels that having healthy, vigorous trees is the best protection.

There is a grub that gets into the olives - it appeared one year, so they picked that particular area of olives early to ensure that they didn't breed or spread to other areas.

Other pests include emus, which eat lots of olives, and kangaroos. Crows are a pest too, but not on the olives - they pull the rubbers off the windscreen wipers on the cars!

Harvesting and Processing

The olives are harvested in autumn - ten to fifteen people are employed for the harvest, depending on the season. Olives are naturally biennial, but can become quadrennial in drought! Timing the picking is very important to get the flavours in the oil just right. The olives are harvested by using wattle sticks in a raking or stroking motion in the trees, though sometimes the trees have to be whacked a bit. The olives are collected on shade-cloth placed on the ground under the tree.

Neil drives the olives to Adelaide (up to 20 times) for pressing into oil - he uses a plant which he is very happy with as the machinery is always cleaned properly and the temperature used is exactly what he wants.

Their oil is genuine extra virgin oil - extra virgin oil is the premium, top quality oil. It can be used on salads, on bread, potatoes or other vegetables, or in many dips etc. Extra virgin oil is defined by the level of free fatty acids present - these are bad for the body. Extra virgin must have less than 1% free fatty acids, virgin 1-3%. The next grade, pure olive oil is from 3-5 or 6%. Neil notices unpalatable flavours when olive oil reaches about 0.5%! Excess free fatty acids can develop in the bottle or because of bad management of the olives.

Neil says oils with over 1% free fatty acids are best used in cooking as the off flavours and unhealthy fatty acids are expelled in cooking.

According to Neil, some "extra virgin" olive oils in the supermarket have been chemically or physically cleaned up to remove off flavours, then have some genuine extra virgin oil added to put the flavour back in.

Mount Zero olive oil is distributed throughout Australia, and through the on-farm shop (which also carries a range of organic relishes, vinegars and other products). Mt Zero Olives is located at Winfield Rd Laharum. To obtain the oil, try your local health food shop or contact the Biodynamic Marketing Co Ltd on 03 5966 7370.