



Scientific Name:

Olea europaea

English:

Olive Tree

Maltese:

*is-sigra taż-żebbuġ,
iż-żejtuna*

The Olive tree is evergreen, being normally short, with a disproportionately broad crown. As the tree ages, the trunk becomes gnarled and twisted. It has leathery, linear, dark green leaves with a whitish underside – the latter being an indication that it is densely covered with short hairs. The latter feature helps to reduce water loss by creating a thin film of moist air beneath the leaf, hence reducing the moisture difference between the leaf structure and its surroundings. The small, whitish, 4-petalled flowers are, in turn, scented and found in branched inflorescences.

The Olive tree was probably introduced to the Maltese Islands in antiquity due to its economic importance, with it formerly being extensively cultivated for food (olives) and for oil production. The place names iż-Żebbuġ and iż-Żejtun, together with the fact that some Olive trees in Malta may be up to 2000 years old, bear witness to this. Meanwhile, Malta also hosts a wild cultivar of Olive tree which is very rare, and when compared to the cultivated species, has smaller leaves and fruits.

The Olive tree is today considered to be part of the Maltese landscape. It is a protected tree under national legislation. In this regard, heavy pruning, felling, and uprooting (amongst other actions) is subject to a permit from the relevant Authority. Tree Protected Areas have also been designated under national legislation to afford protection to areas where ancient specimens of this species are found in the wild. Meanwhile, under the EU Habitats Directive, Malta has also designated Natura 2000 sites for maquis habitats based on this species, so as to maintain and improve their status.

