



LIQUID

GOLD

IN THE SUNSHINE STATE

A little divine inspiration led a Bushnell, Fla., couple to try their hand at the ancient art of olive growing.

STORY BY CLAIRE VATH /// PHOTOS BY JAMIE COLE

When you picture an olive grove, perhaps you envision a bucolic, grassy field dotted with thick, gnarled trees set against the backdrop of the Mediterranean. Now recalibrate that thinking a bit, and move your finger around the globe until you land upon that fertile, olive-growing region of ... Florida.

Yes, that Florida—better known as the land of retirees, sunbaked beach-goers and Mickey Mouse.

Tired of trudging through long Wisconsin winters, John and Beth Barth migrated to Naples, Fla., in 1989. “Beth was working at the time for a guy developing some condos in the area, and we came down and bought a house on the sly,” says John, at the time a superintendent for a Milwaukee general contractor.

The Northerners found the prolonged sunshine and temperate climate mighty agreeable, as they did the small-town feel of the little beach town with sugar-white sands. But Naples began to swell in population. “It just really grew,” Beth relates, and the Barths began looking around for something a little quieter.

“We found Bushnell, Florida, through a friend of Beth’s,” John says. A little more than three hours north of Naples, the town and its population of less than 3,000 offered the peace and quiet the Barths craved. “And it’s got big oak trees,” John adds.

DIVINE INSPIRATION

The couple purchased a 10-acre property beneath some of those sprawling oaks and discussed what to do with the rest of the land. Call it a God wink or just a quest to grow something, but whatever you call it, Beth was looking for a new hobby and happened upon a little heavenly revelation.

“I was going to grow mushrooms on logs; I even took a course,” she says. “Then we were going to do aquaponics. But that didn’t work out. Everything froze,” she



smiles, referring to an unusual, but not unheard of cold snap in the area.

What about olives? The couple wondered. On a whim, they purchased 10 trees and planted them on their property.

A little less than two years later, Beth saw an episode of “60 Minutes,” in which a story featured Catholic Dominican Sisters at the Mission San Jose in Fremont, Calif. It just so happened the sisters were cultivating a large grove of olive trees, bottling the rich, golden oil pressed from the stone fruit. Impressed, she wrote to the nuns, requesting additional information.

“The head of the convent—the Mother Superior—called me back,” Beth chuckles. She didn’t expect a response, but the Mother Superior told Beth: “Olives grow naturally. All you have to do is have them in a good location. No fertilizer needed.”

ANCIENT HISTORY

Reaching as far back to 3000 B.C. Syria, olives, their cultivation and oil play important roles in ancient and modern civilizations alike. Perhaps one of the United States’ most ardent olive oil

admirers was President Thomas Jefferson, who, in the early 1800s, imported olive trees from France and had them planted in coastal Georgia and South Carolina to varying degrees of success.

At about the same time as Jefferson began his work with olive trees, the Franciscan brothers brought them to the West Coast, and the first recorded commercial olive oil mill set up shop in 1871 in Ventura County, Calif. In the late 1980s, the California olive oil demand really burgeoned, owing in part to the rise of gourmet cuisine utilizing locally sourced product. Today, 98% of U.S. olive oil is produced in California, with smaller quantities produced in Oregon, Georgia, Texas, Arizona, Hawaii and Florida.

As for the Sunshine State, “It’s been documented that olives have grown here since the 1700s,” says Michael O’Hara Garcia, executive director of the Florida Olive Council. However, the crop that really blossomed in Florida was citrus.

“When the railroad was built, running down the East Coast, people could load oranges straight into freight cars,” says Garcia. “No infrastructure was needed.

Citrus was picked, put in a box and shipped up North.”

Olives require a little more in the way of processing into oil, and, adds Garcia, “they were more of a curiosity crop here. No one really focused on them as a business.”

The U.S. today is the third largest national market for olive oil with an 80-million-gallon-a-year consumption. “The market is there in the U.S.,” Garcia says. “Florida has a built-in market because of the huge ethnic populations.”

Olive trees are tough and long-lasting—one of its most endearing, if not enduring, qualities is its hardiness and ability to thrive in poor conditions. The sandy loam soils around the Bushnell area force most farmers to use the land for cattle pasture. Yet, olive trees thrive in Northern Florida, agreeing with the Sunshine State’s climate, as well as the soil.

“The bottom line on growing,” says Garcia, is to “plant trees at least a year old in full sun. Look very carefully at your soil and topography, making sure you plant in well-drained areas. Olive trees are very hardy. They can grow in the desert and are drought-resistant. One thing that’ll >>



kill them is too much water. “And,” he continues, “they’re like children. You really need to take care of them the first three years. After that, they’re going to make it.”

A HANDS-OFF CROP

A decade ago, the Barths began growing as a hobby. “We started with 10 arbequina trees,” says Beth, a delicate-tasting varietal ideal for producing oil with an intense fruitiness. “They’re big trees now.”

Over time, the couple expanded their grove, and now cultivate 100 trees, mostly arbequina with some additional koroneiki—an ideal Greek olive for oil production. “And we recently bought some hojiblanco from Texas—a table olive,” says Beth.

“We have to keep the weeds out,” says Beth, “and ants ... especially around the little trees as they’re getting established. The big trees aren’t so much of a worry.”

The two biggest challenges in Florida, says Garcia are chill hours and summer rainfall. Cool weather promotes olive fruiting. The stone fruit requires 200 to 300 “chill hours” (below 47 degrees) each year for flower bud development, so in some years, Florida may not get that amount of time. However, in the Bushnell area, those chill hours average from 200 to 300 in a typical year.

Another concern, says Garcia, “Rainfall knocks the blooms off,” if the trees flower in mid- to late spring. “But at least in the past few years, we’re seeing blooming unusually early—February and March—so summer rainfall may not consistently be an issue.”

Right now, the Barths aren’t too concerned about any of that, though. “At this point,” says Beth, “We’re not that big. Eventually, we’ll probably have the olives pressed and sell locally, but we have no olive press nearby, and many of the presses require a minimum of 50 pounds of olives in order to press.”

So, what do the couple do with the olives they pick now?

“Eat ‘em!” John booms. “Beth pickles them and puts them in a garlic brine! Right now they’re for our own use and consumption until the trees get big enough.

“We’re stumbling along,” he adds. “Everything we’ve done is what we’ve learned on the Internet. We’re finding what works, and finding that the olive trees, in general, don’t require a whole lot of attention.” **FL**

■ See a video, visit with the Barths and find out more about growing olives at myFarmLife.com/olives.

In 2010, John and Beth Barth realized they needed a tractor to maintain their land. “We didn’t really know what to buy,” John says. “We wanted a small tractor.”

The Barths drove to Brooksville, Fla., 30 minutes away and purchased a shiny red GC2400. “We knew it was a good name,” says John of the Massey Ferguson brand. They also purchased a rotary cutter, a front-end loader, potato puller and a disk for all the needs on their property.

In the five-plus years the Barths have owned the tractor, John has put more than 285 hours on the machine. “I’ve spent hundreds of hours with the front-end loader, moving wood chips, soil and driveway stone,” he says, noting it’s a small, but powerful tractor, especially considering it’s used to maintain 10 acres.

“It’s not a big machine,” John explains, “but it’s perfect. It’s quick; that’s one of the nice things about it. The tractor gets around the front yard and house real fast.”

John also cites comfort. “It’s saved my back a million times,” he says.

“The tractor has been a godsend, a blessing for us,” John adds. “It always runs! That’s the main thing. Our tractor has been a very, very good thing for us.”