

With a Hand from Israel Brazil Embarks on Long-Term Olive Tree Project

Contributed by Isaura Daniel
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The Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa) is testing the cultivation of Moroccan olive trees in the Brazilian semi-arid. The trees were planted towards the end of last year in the northeastern states of Pernambuco and Bahia, and in the southeastern state of Minas Gerais, and should start bearing fruit in 2008.

The research is part of a bigger project by the Embrapa Semi-Arid unit for bringing new crop alternatives, other than grapes and mangoes, to producers in that area of the country. Overall, the test includes 40 different types of olive trees from Italy, Israel, Greece, Spain, France, Chile and Argentina, in addition to Morocco.

The Moroccan variety is called Pischoline Maroc. According to associate research manager Joston Simão Assis, the olive trees are developing well so far. The research will only bring more concrete results, though, after the trees start bearing olives, which takes place three years after planting.

Presently, there is no large-scale commercial olive production in Brazil. In addition to the Embrapa semi-arid project, there are other experiments under way in the Brazilian states of Minas Gerais, Santa Catarina and in Rio Grande do Sul (the two latter states in southern Brazil). In Rio Grande do Sul, the research is being developed in the city of Pelotas, but it is in the hands of a different Embrapa unit.

Assis claimed that the olive tree was among the plants chosen for testing as an alternative for the semi-arid because the Mediterranean Basin, which is the world's largest producer of olives, already has all of its areas dominated by cultivation, and other parts of the world, such as Australia and Argentina, are achieving good performance in olive production.

One of the obstacles to be faced by the plants in the Brazilian semi-arid, according to Assis, is the lack of cold weather. "Olive trees need a little cold weather," he explained. In the Mediterranean, cold weather exists in adequate quantities.

The dry weather in the Brazilian semi-arid, on the other hand, is quite similar to that of the Mediterranean Basin. The lack of cold weather, says Assis, must be complemented in another way, to be figured out through research.

The project is an Embrapa Semi-Arid initiative, in partnership with the Development Company of the Sao Francisco and Parnaíba Valleys (Codevasf), an organization connected to the Ministry of National Integration.

Two of the olive tree experiments are being carried out in areas pertaining to Codevasf. One is in Bom Jesus da Lapa, in Bahia, and another is in Jaíba, in Minas Gerais.

The third experiment is being conducted in an area that belongs to Embrapa, in Petrolina, in Pernambuco. Each area has approximately 160 olive trees, totaling 480.

Although they came from different countries, all of the varieties were imported from the Volcani Center Institute, in Israel. The consultant for the project, Iuval Chen, is Israeli.

The research coordinator is Paulo Roberto Coelho Lopes, from Embrapa. Olives, the fruit of the olive tree, are used for producing olive oil.

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