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## **From Tradition to Trend: The Olive Plant in Contemporary Design**

### **De la tradición a la tendencia: El olivo en el diseño contemporáneo**

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## Abstract

The olive plant, with its rich cultural and historical roots, has beautifully carved out a niche for itself in contemporary design. In this article, we dive into the many ways the olive plant enriches our living spaces, exploring its aesthetic appeal, symbolic meaning, and practical benefits. Its unique texture, color, and shape can transform a room, creating a calm and stylish atmosphere that feels both inviting and sophisticated. We also share a blend of historical insights and modern examples to illustrate how versatile and appealing the olive plant can be in today's decor. Beyond just its visual charm, we discuss the psychological and health benefits of incorporating olive plants into our homes and gardens, like reducing stress and improving air quality. By tracing the olive plant's journey from a revered ancient symbol to a contemporary design trend, we hope to inspire designers and homeowners alike to embrace this timeless beauty. Whether you're looking to add a touch of tranquility to your space or simply appreciate its aesthetic qualities, the olive plant offers a wonderful opportunity to enhance our environments with a piece of nature and history.

**Keywords:** olive planet, Interior Design, Environmental Design, Decoration, contemporary

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## Resumen

El olivo, con sus ricas raíces culturales e históricas, se ha ganado un hermoso nicho en el diseño contemporáneo. En este artículo, profundizamos en las muchas formas en que el olivo enriquece nuestros espacios vitales, explorando su atractivo estético, significado simbólico y beneficios prácticos. Su textura, color y forma únicos pueden transformar una habitación, creando una atmósfera tranquila y elegante que se siente a la vez acogedora y sofisticada. También compartimos una combinación de conocimientos históricos y ejemplos modernos para ilustrar cuán versátil y atractiva puede ser la planta del olivo en la decoración actual. Más allá de su encanto visual, analizamos los beneficios psicológicos y para la salud de incorporar plantas de olivo en nuestros hogares y jardines, como reducir el estrés y mejorar la calidad del aire. Al rastrear el viaje de la planta del olivo desde un símbolo antiguo venerado hasta una tendencia de diseño contemporáneo, esperamos inspirar a los diseñadores y propietarios de viviendas por igual para adoptar esta belleza atemporal. Ya sea que esté buscando agregar un toque de tranquilidad a su espacio o

simplemente apreciar sus cualidades estéticas, la planta del olivo ofrece una maravillosa oportunidad de mejorar nuestros entornos con un pedazo de naturaleza e historia.

**Palabras clave:** árbol del olivo; Diseño de Interiores; Diseño Ambiental; Decoración; Diseño contemporáneo

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## 1. Historical Context of the Olive Plant

The olive plant boasts a rich and captivating history, particularly in the Mediterranean region, where it has been cultivated and cherished for thousands of years. More than just a simple plant, it serves as a powerful symbol of peace, wisdom, and prosperity, influencing many aspects of life and culture. Its deep roots in tradition and significance reflect a connection to the land and a way of life that has endured through the ages.

### 1.1. Mediterranean Symbolism and Uses

The symbolism of the olive tree runs deep within the Mediterranean, wherein this plant has come to represent the themes of peace, purity, and resilience in many cultures. In ancient Egypt, olive branches were laid in tombs as a sign of eternal peace to honor the dead and give rest to the afterlife (Ghirshman, 1962). The connection between the olive tree and the afterlife was further emphasized by its use in mummification, highlighting the sacred role of this plant (Hepper, 1990).

In ancient Greece, the olive tree was more than just a plant; it was woven into the fabric of mythology and everyday life. It was dedicated to Athena, the deity of wisdom, who bestowed on her people the olive tree to portray peace and prosperity (Rohde, 1925). Victors in the ancient Olympic Games were crowned with olive wreaths, known as "kotinos," linking the tree to honor and triumph (Kyle, 2007). Olive oil also had a significant place in rituals, symbolizing

purity and strength, particularly during the anointing of athletes and kings (Boardman & La Rocca, 2007).

The olive branch became synonymous with peace and victory in ancient Rome, where victorious generals were adorned with olive wreaths during military triumphs (Scheid, 2003). The olive tree was central to Roman agriculture and religious practices, with olive oil being used in lamps, medicinal treatments, and perfumes—symbols of abundance and divine favor (Mattingly, 1995). In Islamic tradition, the olive tree is revered, mentioned multiple times in the Quran as a "blessed tree" (Quran 24:35) associated with light and guidance. Olive oil symbolizes spiritual enlightenment and wisdom. In the Islamic Mediterranean, it has been integral to daily life, used for cooking, medicine, and hygiene (Della Vida, 1949).

Today, in modern Muslim communities, the olive tree represents sustainability and providence. In Spain, the Phoenicians and Romans started olive cultivation, which then became an integral part of the nation's agriculture and culture. The olive tree is a symbol of resilience, which flourishes in arid lands and reflects the spirit of endurance. Production of olive oil has contributed to Spain's economy over the centuries and plays an important role in religious events, as it is used in Catholic rituals to anoint, representing recovery and sanctity according to (Fernández-González, 2003).

However, In North Africa, especially among Berber communities, regards the olive tree as a symbol of fertility and good fortune. The tree is of much cultural significance, from traditional medicine and food, using olive oil as an ingredient. Planting olive trees has been a generational practice that symbolizes continuity with the past, heritage, and expectations for the future. As indicated by (Khellil in 2013), large-scale plantations of trees often remain in families, even becoming sources of family wealth or other highly valued family ties.

## 2. Benefits and practical applications of Olive Plants in Contemporary design

The integration of olive plants into modern interiors boasts several practical benefits and aesthetic advantages, from air quality improvement to adding that inimitable touch of elegance. It is for this reason that olive plants are considered highly valued in modern living and outdoor spaces. This section will explain it.

### 2.1. Adaptation Air Quality

The main advantages of the olive plants in our life are their adaptability to the Mediterranean and arid climates. Originally from the Mediterranean region, olive plants are suitable for hot and dry conditions; they can be grown even in regions with scarce water resources. Due to their drought-resistant nature, they can be considered ideal for regions with water scarcity in landscaping with sustainability concerns. International Olive Council, n.d. The use of the olive plants in such a climate is in line with the principles of xeriscaping, emphasizing water-efficient gardening techniques. One of the amazing benefits that come with bringing olive plants indoors is their air-purifying effects. Like many indoor plants, olive trees help absorb toxins and pollutants, generally contributing to a healthier environment in which to live. By absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen, they enhance overall indoor air quality, which can have a positive impact on our well-being (Wolverton, 1997).

### 2.2. Practical Uses in interior design

Further, Olive plants are relatively easy to care for, making them perfect for busy individuals or those new to plant care. They require minimal watering and can thrive in various light conditions, from bright indirect light to full sunlight. With proper care, olive plants can live for many years, providing long-lasting beauty and enjoyment (Sunset Magazine, 2020)



Figure 1: Mediterranean olive tree as a central decorative element in L'Occitane's retail space, enhancing the ambiance with a natural and Mediterranean aesthetic. Source: Retail | PAST PROJECTS: Mediterranean Olive Tree at L'Occitane.

Therefore, they are ideal for those concerned with conserving water. Live plants instead of artificial ones contribute to a greener and more eco-friendly living space (International Olive Council, n.d.). Practical Uses in Interior Design The olive plant will be versatile in interior design applications. They work great as focal points in large pots placed in living rooms and entryways. Use an olive branch in a vase, or place a small version in pots on tables and shelves to bring the outdoors in, adding touches of subtle beauty to a kitchen, bathroom, and even a home office.

### 2.3. Aesthetic Versatility and Calming Ambiance

Olive plants infuse a sense of sophistication and organic elegance into modern interiors. Their silvery-green foliage can beautifully complement everything from minimalist and modern to rustic and Mediterranean in style. Use it as a show-stopping centerpiece in the living room or as a subtle accent piece in the bedroom; the olive plant is sure to enhance the aesthetic appeal of any room it occupies (Better Homes & Gardens, 2021). The presence of olive plants can

transform indoor spaces into serene and tranquil environments. Their gentle, flowing leaves and natural beauty contribute to a sense of calm and relaxation. This makes olive plants an ideal choice for areas meant for rest and rejuvenation, such as living rooms, bedrooms, and study areas. Imagine reading a book or meditating beside a graceful olive tree, it's pure bliss (Architectural Digest, 2021). In addition to their aesthetic and symbolic importance, indoor plants—inclusive of olive trees—are similarly touted as harboring psychological and physiological advantages. For example, multiple studies have found that green environments reduce stress and enhance emotional well-being. A systematic review of indoor plant research indicated a consistent impact on reducing anxiety and promoting relaxation; in some studies, plants have even been reported to increase pain tolerance in clinical settings (Hassan et al., 2021). Furthermore, actively caring for plants (e.g., an olive tree) have shown physiological and psychological stress response decreases when compared to a control group, suggesting that plants play a role in forming restorative indoor spaces (Lee et al., 2015).

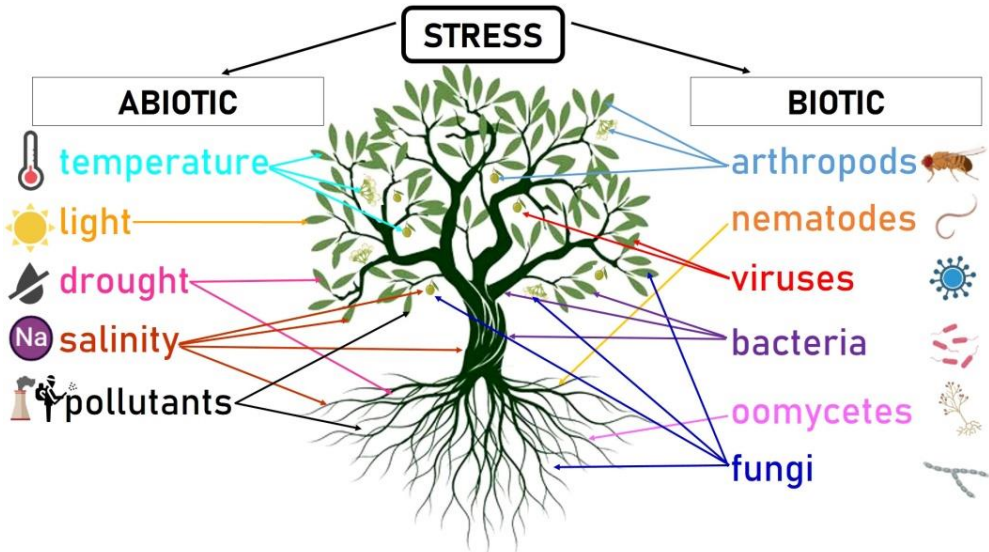


Figure 2: Schematic summary of the most relevant abiotic and biotic stresses that can affect olive trees. Arrows point to the plant parts that can be affected by the particular stress (i.e. leaf, flower, fruit, trunk, stem, root). Martina, Jesus 2023

Nonetheless, a more recent study conducted at Drexel University concluded that potted plants have a minimal contribution to improving indoor air quality since they absorb pollutants at a slow rate (Cummings & Waring, 2019). In a similar vein, the American Lung Association noted that while plants can enhance indoor health in other ways, we should not rely on them primarily to clean indoor air (American Lung Association, 2021). Nevertheless, plants are still highly valuable in terms of their psychological benefits in indoor spaces. Some studies show plants help create better focus, reduce depressive symptoms, and decrease overall anxiety levels (Bringslimark et al. 2009). Olive plants, in particular, might contribute to a more calming, centered environment due to their graceful, flowing leaves and cooler-toned foliage; they create a perfect addition to interiors focused on relaxation and health (Piedmont Healthcare, 2021).



Figure 3: A potted olive tree enhances the elegance of this modern interior, blending natural elements with contemporary design. The use of a rustic stone planter adds texture and character to the space. Source: 3A Design Studio

#### 2.4. Low Maintenance and Longevity

Symbolism and Emotional Connection Besides adding color to one's space, incorporating an olive plant brings in some symbolic and emotional feeling. These plants are attributed to peace, wisdom, and longevity; they connect us with the heritage and traditions of the Mediterranean region. Because of this meaning attached, emotional resonance can fill up in one's personal space, building a cultured environment (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). Sustainable Design Choice The selection of olive plants for interior design is in line with sustainability and eco-friendliness. The olive tree is drought-resistant and requires less water compared to many other plant species.

### 3. Outdoor Design and Urban Integration

Once the plant associated with Mediterranean culture, the olive is making its mark more and more in modern landscape design and urban spaces. Its adaptability to climate and timeless aesthetic make it an excellent choice for both private garden enhancement and public urban landscapes. From landscaping for modern cities to homes aiming at functionality with a bit of beauty, the olive plant has an environmentally friendly yet pleasing aesthetic that can easily fit into an outdoor setting.

Moreover, in bustling urban settings, where green space is very minimal, the olive plant has become a favourite for rooftop gardens, balconies, and terraces. Its ability to thrive in containers and low-maintenance nature make it a perfect solution for city dwellers looking to add greenery without the need for large plots of land.

The olive tree can grow very well in constrained spaces: it grows rather slowly and requires little care, thus it is ideal for long-term urban use. Silvery-green foliage brightens urban space with a refreshing touch of nature in areas

heavy with concrete. According to Matlock (2020), olive trees improve the aesthetics, help to create a tranquil atmosphere, and offer little pieces of nature right in the middle of a city.

Furthermore, In public spaces, olive trees are increasingly found in parks, squares, and pedestrian zones, bringing beauty and shade. With the increased pressure of establishing sustainable urban areas, even urban planners are reverting to the use of olive plants, especially for cities with limited water resources, due to their ability to survive under harsh conditions. Its resilience to drought and low water requirements make it an excellent option for cities that need to create green spaces while conserving water (Georgopoulou & Tsoutsos, 2018).



Figure 4: The headquarters of Zitouna Bank in Lac II, Tunisia, features centuries-old olive trees, showcasing the integration of cultural heritage with modern architecture.

Source : Wikimedia Commons - File: Siège de la banque Zitouna au Lac II.jpg

To summarise, olive trees offer practical value: they provide year-round greenery, and in some cases, they even produce olives, adding both aesthetic and functional benefits to outdoor living spaces (Piercy, 2021).

## 4. Conclusion

The olive plant, steeped in history and culture, has taken center stage in today's design world. What once symbolized peace, wisdom, and prosperity in ancient Mediterranean cultures has now become a rich addition to modern interiors and cityscapes alike. Its beauty combines well with practical advantages of air purification and low maintenance, making the olive plant a perfect choice to bring a touch of nature into your spaces. More than just a decorative element, the olive plant creates serene and calm surroundings, making it ideal for relaxation and rejuvenation. In a world where urban environments lack greenery, the olive plant stands out for adaptability and resilience, hence offering a sustainable solution for indoor and outdoor landscaping. In essence, the transformation of the olive plant from a revered symbol to a trendy decor choice reflects our growing desire to incorporate the natural world into our daily lives. By planting olive trees in our homes and cities, we enhance not only our surroundings but also forge a connection to a rich cultural legacy that continues to inspire us today.

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