

# The healing power of olive leaf



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As I write this article, I am in the fabled North African country of Morocco, where the annual olive harvest is in full swing.

In many parts of the world, including Morocco, Italy, Spain, France, Lebanon and Syria, olives are staple foods found on every table. They are abundant and cheap, and come in a variety of forms, from green to pink to black, and are cured in a multitude of ways. Here in Morocco, almost every restaurant sets a bowl of olives on the table, and no dinner is complete without them.

The first pressing of oil from olives, referred to as extra virgin olive oil, is highly prized among chefs worldwide, and is credited with playing an important role in the overall healthy nature of the Mediterranean diet. Easy-to-cook-with and delicious in flavor, olive oil has earned a reputation for its health benefits as well as for its versatility of use.

But another part of the olive harvest is less known, yet imparts tremendous health benefits. That part of the harvest is olive leaf – a traditional medicinal herb whose therapeutic uses date back centuries.

Early references to the olive leaf as medicine can be found in the Bible: *"The fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine."* (Ezekiel 47:12)

The ancient Egyptians attributed heavenly powers to the olive leaf, and used preparations of it in the process of mummification.

In traditional Moroccan medicine, an infusion of olive leaf has been consumed to stabilize blood sugar and control diabetes. This use has been corroborated in published studies.

Today, olive leaf is becoming increasingly well-known and appreciated outside of olive-growing regions, as science on its benefits expands.

One of the primary compounds in olive leaf, a substance called oleuropein, has attracted scientific attention since the early 1900s.

An iridoid by definition, oleuropein exhibits antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal activity, and is useful for fighting various types of internal infections. Oleuropein also appears to increase the body's production of thermogenin, a substance that helps us to burn fat more efficiently.

In early studies, oleuropein demonstrated blood pressure-lowering properties. Studies conducted in Milan have shown that this compound is a potent antioxidant, inhibiting the oxidation of lipids in the blood, and lowering the risk of cardiovascular disease.

In fact, the antioxidant activity of olive leaf is higher than that of green tea. A significant body of science shows that antioxidant compounds derived from plants provide profound health benefits, and help to reduce the risk of many chronic and degenerative diseases.

Olive leaf is an especially good source of the anti-cancer compounds apigenin and luteolin, and is a source of the anti-malarial agent cinchonine. And oleuropein has also shown protective capabilities against breast cancer.

Olive leaf extract also acts as an anti-inflammatory. Like oxidation, inflammation is a key factor in chronic and degenerative diseases. Animal studies additionally suggest that olive leaf extract may protect against nerve damage, and may be of value in cases of stroke.

In the world of medicinal plants, it is often the case that traditional use of plants precedes, by centuries, the science that corroborates the same uses. This is certainly true with olive leaf. Regarded as somewhat of a tonic cure-all in ancient times, olive leaf and olive leaf extracts appear to promote better health overall and help to ward off a variety of serious health disorders.

Even though the leaf of the olive tree is far less well-known than the fruits of the tree and the precious oil derived from them, a steadily growing body of science points to the leaf as highly valuable, and worthy of its ancient medicinal reputation.

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