

Mediterranean scrub

Man and the biome Mediterranean agriculture

Olive trees are the native arboreal species that is most commonly grown in the region of the Mediterranean scrub and is of remarkable importance in its inhabitants' economy. Nevertheless, another two originally native species should be mentioned for their use: cork oaks and carob trees.

Other important plants that are grown here are cereals, pulse vegetables, fruit trees, vegetables and salads. Oil and wine are the most important produce on which the economy of scrub areas is based.

Cork oak

Cork oak forests are closely related to the climatic conditions of some Mediterranean areas. These forests have scattered populations forming agro-silvi-pastoral systems which are extremely rich in flora and fauna. In particular, the native flora, very rich in aromatic and medicinal species, may increase the value of cork oaks. Many vegetal species growing in this forest, because of their variety and long blooming period, supply bees with excellent supplies. Cork is collected only from trunks, and its production has remarkably increased over the last few years; the new cork oak forests actually cover almost 120,000 hectares.

Olive trees

Olive trees, probably native to Syria, were brought to Asia minor, Egypt, Greece, Italy and other Mediterranean countries. By growing this tree, man has remarkably expanded the geographical distribution of this plant, which can now be found from the centre-south of France to pre-Saharan areas. The Mediterranean species, *Olea europea*, consists of two subspecies: oleaster or wild olive (*Olea oleaster*) and cultivated olive (*Olea sativa*). Cultivated olive trees are bigger than wild olive trees, approximately 4 to 12 metres tall, and can reach 20 metres tall if they find their ideal climate and soil. Their trunk is big, their branches are rounded, smooth and thorn-less, their foliage is generally well developed and soaring. Olive twigs are flexible and sometimes dangling, their leaves are lanceolate, green and hairless on top, bright white at the bottom. Cultivated olives are big, fleshy, rich in oil, but fewer than in wild olive trees and in any case much fewer than their flowers.

The myth of olive trees

The ancients used to say: the Mediterranean begins and ends with the olive tree, to signify the deep and extremely close relation between this plant and its geographical area, regarded as an organised unit, well distinguished from the cold and wet provinces which began in the north and the desert and dry areas of the south and east. Grown since the antiquity and worshipped by the Greeks (as the legend goes, it was Athena who planted the first olive tree in Greece), in many cultures it is one of the symbols of peace. In Jewish religion, olive oil was used in sacred rites: prophets and kings were anointed as a sign of investiture.

Breeding

In Mediterranean scrub areas, there generally is a marked difference between harsh winters and long hot summers. This natural condition forces shepherds to use high pastures during the summer and to move to milder climates, which are therefore closer to the sea, during the winter.

This migration led to the development of a peculiar breeding culture: transhumance. Even if there are many historical and geographical differences among the different breeding systems, transhumant culture is common and similar in all those countries that are related to the Mediterranean. It can be defined as a breeding model based on the alternate and periodical movement of flocks between two regions with different climates.

Breeding mainly concerns sheep and goats; cattle only to a certain extent.

Tourism

A source of wealth that is becoming more and more important is tourism. The climate and beauty of the sights of this ecosystem attract many holiday-makers, especially in the warmest months. The tourism sector is developing so much as to become a potential danger for the environment.