

# *Terminalia buceras*: Black Olive<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Though commonly called 'Black olive tree', this native of the upper Florida Keys (some consider it native, others do not) is not the edible olive we know and love, but does produce a small, black seed-capsule. Black olive is a 40 to 50-foot-tall evergreen tree with a smooth trunk holding up strong, wind-resistant branches, forming a pyramidal shape when young but developing a very dense, full, oval to rounded crown with age. Sometimes the top of the crown will flatten with age, and the tree grows horizontally. The lush, dark green, leathery leaves are two to four inches long and clustered at branch tips, sometimes mixed with the 1/4 to 1 1/2-inch-long spines found along the branches.

## General Information

**Scientific name:** *Terminalia buceras*

**Pronunciation:** ter-mih-NAIL-ee-uh bew-SER-azz

**Common name(s):** black olive, oxhorn bucida

**Family:** *Combretaceae*

**USDA hardiness zones:** 10B through 11 (Figure 2)

**Origin:** native to the West Indies

**UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status:** Caution, may be recommended but manage to prevent escape (South); Not considered a problem species at this time, may be recommended (North and Central)



Figure 1. Full Form - *Terminalia buceras*: black olive  
Credits: UF/IFAS

**Uses:** hedge; reclamation; street without sidewalk; shade; specimen; tree lawn 4–6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; urban tolerant; highway median; indoors

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Figure 2. Range.

## Description

**Height:** 40 to 50 feet  
**Spread:** 35 to 50 feet  
**Crown uniformity:** irregular  
**Crown shape:** oval, round  
**Crown density:** dense  
**Growth rate:** fast  
**Texture:** fine

## Foliage

**Leaf arrangement:** alternate (Figure 7)  
**Leaf type:** simple  
**Leaf margin:** entire  
**Leaf shape:** obovate, oblanceolate  
**Leaf venation:** brachidodrome, pinnate



Figure 3. Leaf - *Terminalia buceras*: black olive  
 Credits: UF/IFAS

**Leaf type and persistence:** evergreen  
**Leaf blade length:** 2 to 4 inches  
**Leaf color:** dark green on top, paler green underneath  
**Fall color:** no color change  
**Fall characteristic:** not showy

## Flower

**Flower color:** creamy yellow to light brown  
**Flower characteristics:** not showy; urn-shaped; emerges in clusters on long spikes  
**Flowering:** spring and summer



Figure 4. Flower - *Terminalia buceras*: black olive  
 Credits: UF/IFAS

## Fruit

**Fruit shape:** oval  
**Fruit length:** ¼ to ½ inch  
**Fruit covering:** fleshy drupe  
**Fruit color:** black  
**Fruit characteristics:** does not attract wildlife; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem  
**Fruiting:** ripens mid to late summer

## Trunk and Branches

**Trunk/branches:** branches droop; not showy; typically one trunk; thorns  
**Bark:** brown and smooth, becoming rough and fissured with age  
**Pruning requirement:** needed for strong structure  
**Breakage:** resistant  
**Current year twig color:** gray



**Current year twig thickness:** thin, medium  
**Wood specific gravity:** unknown



Figure 5. Canopy - *Terminalia buceras*: black olive  
Credits: UF/IFAS



Figure 6. Bark - *Terminalia buceras*: black olive  
Credits: Gitta Hasing, UF/IFAS

## Culture

**Light requirement:** full sun to partial shade  
**Soil tolerances:** sand; loam; clay; acidic; alkaline; moist but well-drained  
**Drought tolerance:** high  
**Aerosol salt tolerance:** high

## Other

**Roots:** not a problem  
**Winter interest:** no  
**Outstanding tree:** no  
**Ozone sensitivity:** unknown  
**Verticillium wilt susceptibility:** unknown  
**Pest resistance:** resistant to pests/diseases

## Use and Management

The inconspicuous, small, greenish-yellow flowers are produced in 4-inch-long spikes during spring and summer and eventually form the black fruits which, unfortunately, exude a staining tannic acid material which could damage patios, sidewalks, or vehicles parked below. Besides this one drawback, Black olive is beautifully suited as a street, shade, or specimen tree for frost-free areas, but is probably over-planted. There are many native trees which could be used in its place, including satin leaf, gumbo-limbo and others.

Black olive grows slowly and should be planted in full sun or partial shade on well-drained, moist soils. Plants may be slightly damaged at 32°F, but are killed at 25°F. Trees may show chlorosis on high pH soils.

Propagation is by seeds (with difficulty) or layering.

## Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern but occasionally bothered by sooty mold and bark borer. Eryphide mites cause galls but no control is needed.

## References

Koeser, A. K., Hasing, G., Friedman, M. H., and Irving, R. B. 2015. Trees: North & Central Florida. University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

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