Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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A Brief History of Figs

On June 2, 2006, (Reuters) scientists announced the finding of a stash of well preserved, though carbonated, figs at an archeological site in the Lower Jordan Valley 8 miles north of ancient Jericho (now in Israel). The figs were a big, sweet, juicy kind, not the crunchy, seedy and tough packets of the wild edible fig, called "caprifig". The "capri" in the name, which means "goat", suggests that by the time people learned to read and write, the wild fig was already demoted to food for goats.

Since the flowers of edible figs are contained within the immature fruit, the male tree's fruit contains stamens and pollen, and the female tree's fruit contains the pistil and ovaries. A small fig wasp then pollinates the fruit on both trees by laying its eggs in the tiny hole on the "blossom" end of the fruit. The popular Calimyrna fig must still be grown this way.

The figs found in Israel, however, suggest that the tree that produced them had already developed the modern parthenocarpic form, meaning the fruit develops without insect pollination, but the tree has lost the capability to propagate by seed. In fact, most cultivated figs no longer even fall off the tree, but just hang on the branch, getting bigger and sweeter, until picked. In hot climates, figs will dry right on the tree. For ancient fig-lovers, dried figs must have been a lucky surprise. Not only must they have tasted good—even sweeter than fresh—but they lasted longer! What a concept! The carefully preserved figs in the excavated stash were not distorted, thus had dried on the tree or had deliberately been dried by human improvisation. Radiocarbon dating showed this precious stash to be over 11,200 years old. This antedates even the cultivation of wheat and barley, thought to have occurred 10,000 years ago! Either these dried big figs came from the only tree of its kind in existence, or, as this finding suggests, way back, 11,000 plus years ago, people already knew how to *root fig trees from cuttings*! Thus did the fig, packed with nutrition, earthy taste, satiny texture, sensuousness and mystery, usher in civilization as we now know it.

Scientific classification of the edible fig tree: Genus: *Ficus* Species: *carica*, Family *Moraceae* (Mulberry family), Order: *Rosales*. Figs are indigenous to Persia, Asia Minor and Syria, but now are cultivated in most warm and temperate climates. From earliest times, fig trees have been celebrated in written word for the beauty of their foliage and for its 'sweetness and good fruit' (Judges ix. 2). In Genesis, God outfitted the Garden of Eden with an opulent variety of fruit trees, herbs and animals for Adam and Eve to tend and enjoy. However, of all the glorious fruit trees (Imagine, no pests!!), only the fig tree is mentioned by name, albeit in reference to attire. Figs play central roles in both Greek and Latin cultures. The ancient Greeks insisted their athletes stoke up on the performance-enhancing fruit in preparation for competitions. To keep the secret of Greek athletic prowess to themselves, they prohibited export of their best figs to any foreign competitors.

A fig tree is said to have shaded the wolf mom of Remus and Romulus as she suckled them. Thus was the fig thereafter held sacred by the Romans. The Romans dedicated the fig to Bacchus to be used in festivals (AKA "Bacchanals"). In Cyrene, revelers wore crowns of figs when sacrificing to Saturn, regarded as discoverer of the fig. Pliny speaks in passing of the wild fig, but lists twenty-nine varieties of cultivated figs! He especially praises those of Tarant, Caria (thus the modern scientific name) and Herculaneum. The fig is one of the two sacred fruits of Islam.

Nutritional Value

Figs have the richest mineral content of all common fruit. A 100 gram serving of chopped raw figs contains potassium—232 mg, calcium—35 mg, iron—0.37 mg, magnesium--17 mg, and phosphorus--14 mg. Many other minerals, including zinc, copper, manganese and selenium show up in figs in trace amounts. This same 100 gm serving of figs also supplies 20 percent of our USDA recommended daily requirement of fiber, but only 44 calories! This is why this low carb, low sodium,

and low fat fruit is recommended for a diabetic diet. Of vitamins, figs supply generous amounts of A, C (ascorbic acid), folate and all B-complex nutrients except B-12 (unless a few fig wasps are still loitering inside). For a complete chart of fig nutrients, see:
http://www.thefruitpages.com/chartfigs.shtml

Cultural Requirements

Figs may have originated in the Mediterranean, but we can grow figs in Skagit County too. We just have to keep the following in mind:

Fig trees love heat, but need protection from wind, wind chill and frost. When expecting temperatures (or wind chill) below 20 degrees F, protect fig tree roots and main stem with a generous pile of light- weight mulch, like sawdust. Remove the mulch with return of moderate temperatures. In early spring, apply a trace mineral amended fertilizer recommended for fruit trees in Skagit County (ask about this special tree fertilizer at WSU Extension or your local farm and garden store). Fig trees do best when planted close to the south wall of a house, outbuilding, or other permanent structure. They do even better when kept in a greenhouse, but may take over and need to be defended against, by a ready pair or pruning shears. Yet, in spite of all the heat-love, figs need a reliable source of water: one and one half inches per week. However, before drowning your fig, check that drainage is adequate, as Figs will not tolerate a swamp. Fig trees are not fussy about soil texture but pH should be between 5.5 and 6.5.

In the warmer, more maritime parts of Skagit County, fig trees thrive outdoors with little protection and bear ample fruit. However, east of Sedro-Woolley, little frosts that disappoint anxious gardeners who may have already set out tender annuals in May, and surprise unsuspecting gardeners who have not covered tender summer crops in September, can deal a deadly blow to your fig trees. The most successful fig trees in eastern Skagit County live in greenhouses, plastic enclosures, or other temperature-enhanced microclimates, but a makeshift cloche of row cover fabric will also do the trick.

Some figs produce two crops, the first in summer, and the second in fall. However, two crops may be difficult to tease out of the plant when the substantial part of the growing season is cool and rainy (like this year!).

Figs will take hard pruning in spring. If the upper part of the tree sustains damage from freezing, or if the tree has just gotten too big for its site, do not be afraid to chop it back. The pruned tree will spring back into action in spring and summer as long as the roots and base are in good condition. In fact, in some northern areas with hard winters, such as the U.S. northeast and eastern Canada, fig trees are considered a “die-back” shrub. A healthy fig tree that has seemed to die back in winter can put on 6-7 feet of height in one growing season and produce at least one, if not two crops of ripe sweet fruit. If garden space is limited many fig trees can adapt to containers, but remember to water!

Fig varieties suggested for Pacific Northwest

Variety Name	Color: Skin	Color: Flesh	Notes
Brown Turkey	Brownish-Purple	Pink	Largest fig grown commercially in California.
Desert King	Green	Red	Actually prefers our cooler climate to California!
Italian Honey Fig	Green	Amber	Needs hot southern exposure. Can produce fall crops in good seasons
Osborn Prolific	Dark Reddish Brown	Amber	Sweet, best eaten fresh.
Peter’s	Greenish	Amber	Needs hot southern exposure.

Honey	Yellow		
Violette de Bordeaux	Reddish-purple	Red	Tree is dwarf. Grows well in containers. “Banana-like” flavor.
White Genoa	Apple-green		Crunchy seeds. Better eaten fresh than dried.

In addition, Mission figs are said to grow here as well, but need more protection, augmented heat and attention than those mentioned above.

Enjoying Figs

If you have been blessed with fresh figs on your tree, for heaven’s sake, pick the silky treasures and put them straight into your mouth. If you have too many (lucky you!), vary your fig presentation to family and friends with one or more of the following suggestions:

- Dress up plain breakfast corn meal porridge with accompaniment of sliced fresh (or dried) figs, honey and cream cheese.
- Slice fresh figs into a salad of wild greens drizzled with balsamic or raspberry vinegar.
- Serve fresh figs with vanilla ice cream topped with an especially good balsamic vinegar.
- Stuff fresh figs with goat cheese, and then drizzle with olive oil and season with cracked pepper.
- Serve fresh figs warmed on cinnamon toast and drizzled with yogurt.

Be warned, though, that fresh figs will rapidly spoil or mold. People are not the only lovers of figs after all! Alternatively, if time speeds by too fast, dry them. If using a commercial foods dryer, follow manufacturer’s instructions for figs. If a food dryer is not available, oven-dried figs can make a fun snack or Christmas pudding.

For oven drying, set oven to 225 degrees F. Cut figs in half and place one inch apart on a cookie sheet covered with parchment. Sprinkle the figs with sugar, cinnamon, toppings of choice, or no topping. Bake in oven until fruit is shriveled and edges are dry, but centers are still juicy. If juices run, use a pastry brush to dab the juice back onto the fruit. Transfer the cookie sheet to cooling rack. Remove from pan while still warm and serve immediately, or pack oven-dried figs into containers and store in the freezer. Oven dried figs will keep, if frozen, up to six weeks.

This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.