



# NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

## Figs: Fascinated Fruit of the Ancients (February 19, 2022)

by Susan Franciskovich, UCCE Master Gardener

Ben Pike, a prominent British orchard consultant, reminds us that throughout history the fig tree has always been “a symbol of abundance, fertility and sweetness”. Figs were well known during the height of the Roman and Greek civilizations. The earliest Olympic athletes used figs as a training food. Figs were also awarded as laurels to the winners, becoming the first Olympic medal. It is likely that the fig is one of the first plants to be cultivated by humans.



Excavations have shown that figs originated in the area around Afghanistan and Iran, and cultivation dates back to between 9200 and 9400 BC. Now, of course, figs are naturalized in much of the warm, temperate and subtropical regions of the world.

**Fun Fact:** *California produces 100% of the nation’s dried figs and 98% of the fresh figs.*

Figs (*Ficus carica*) are members of the *Moraceae* family and are grown for their edible fruit; for information about their ornamental relatives see *Ficus*. Figs grow well in most areas of California but need a lot of heat for the fruit to mature properly. Fig trees should have at least 6 hours of sun daily. They need protection from the cold in cooler parts of the state. Fig trees can grow to 20-30 feet but can be pruned yearly to a smaller size during the winter dormant season. They can tolerate wet soils more than most other fruit trees, but they prefer well drained soils.

Gophers can be a problem if not controlled. Figs can be troubled by fungal diseases, as well as the odd bacteria or virus. A common fungus is Fig Rust, which appears as rust-colored spots on the leaf’s underside; it responds well to Neem Oil treatment. Fig trees are largely, however, free from bothersome pests and diseases, but birds, wasps and hornets can cause problems, as they will all enjoy eating your figs. Figs are ripe when they droop, soften and change color. Gardeners enjoy figs best right off the tree, but figs will hold in the refrigerator for 2 to 3 days.

**Fun Fact:** *Fig trees have no blossoms on their branches. The blossom is inside of the fruit. Many tiny flowers produce little edible crunchy seeds which give figs their amazing unique texture.*



While there are over 700 varieties of figs, ‘Black Mission’ is one of the most dependable cultivars for home orchards in our valley. Its purple-black skin with red flesh is good, fresh, or dried. The breba (first crop) matures in early summer, and the second crop matures in September to October. The ‘Brown Turkey’ variety produces 2 crops yearly. It is a large fruit of excellent quality and has purple-green skin and red flesh. Other standard varieties for the San Joaquin Valley are:

‘Osborn Pacific’, ‘Italian Everbearing’, ‘Kadota’, ‘Osborn’, ‘Smyrna-type’ and ‘White Genoa’. Most fig varieties require no pollination. The Smyrna types, usually dried figs from the market, require caprification,

that is pollination by caprifig wasps living nearby. The ‘Calimyrna’, for example, is a commercially grown fig that has excellent properties but requires very specific cross-pollination every 3-5 days with female wasps from the caprifig over a 2–3-week period. This variety is not recommended for the home garden, as capri fig female wasps can be difficult to obtain.

**Fun Fact:** *Sometimes called the “food of gods”, figs are very high in calcium, have more potassium than bananas and, ounce for ounce, have more fiber than prunes.*

Fig trees, with their highly nutritious fruit, are ideal for growing in containers, within easy snacking distance. Their foliage is attractive and lush in appearance, and they can be kept small by yearly pruning. Even fully grown fig trees are content growing in the confined space of a large pot. Figs will often bear fruit by their second or third growing season. Also, since they are self-pollinating, you can just grow one, and it will bear fruit. For a small fig tree, you can start with a pot of 12-14 inches, using high quality potting soil. After a few years, it will need repotting. Place the pot in a sunny location, and keep it watered. Figs are not heavy feeders: an occasional shot of soluble fertilizer works well. You will need to move your potted tree to a protected spot when it gets cold (even a basement or a shed). Figs don’t need sunlight during dormancy but should be watered periodically. When the danger of frost has passed, move the tree back to its sunny summer home.

Figs made their first commercial appearance with the Fig Newton cookie in 1892. It might be time for figs, this ancient and nutritious fruit, to make an appearance in your backyard or on your patio. Either fall or spring is a great time for planting a fig tree!

**The Tulare-Kings County Master Gardeners will be available to answer your questions:**

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Ace Hardware, Visalia-1st Sat./every month, 10 am-1 pm

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Call us: Master Gardeners in Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30

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