

# The Food Forest



## Figs



Known as 'The tree of life' by the ancient Egyptians and much enjoyed by Cleopatra and Ulysses, the fig is a wonderful and delicious species.

There are several fact sheets on figs (*Ficus carica*) available from Departments of Agriculture around Australia and many entries in books on fruit growing. This sheet merely summarises information I have had as personal communication from various sources and is not, to my knowledge, available elsewhere.

If you have a fig which never produces a crop it may be a Capri, a San Pedro or Smyrna fig without a nearby pollinator (see '[caprification](#)') or a poorly adapted Common Fig. Whilst Smyrna used to be the main drying variety grown in South Australia, its management is somewhat tricky and I have not seen one for sale in any nursery. One presumes that there are still a lot of old Smyrnas and their pollinators (Capri) on old fruit blocks in the Riverland in South Australia.

Despite the fact that figs have been in cultivation for over 3000 years they remain somewhat of a mystery crop. They are extraordinary producers of high energy food.

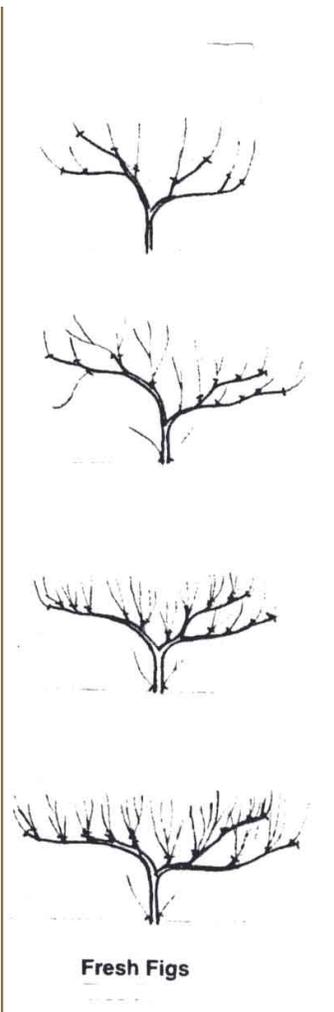
No responsibility is taken for the accuracy of information which follows as much of it is from other people.

**Glace figs:** Virtually all figs can be successfully glazed.

**Dried figs:** Varieties favoured for drying are generally those that have high levels of sugar and usually make good jam too.

**Dessert or fresh-eating figs:** Those with an agreeable flavour and texture... sometimes good for drying too.

At the time of writing we have a collection of all varieties listed below and stock of some of them for



Pruning regime (years 1- 4)  
for training the fig for fresh  
fruit production

sale in our nursery for about \$10 per tree.

## Varieties

### White Adriatic

An early fig suited to cooler areas like the Adelaide Hills, one crop which ripens February, medium to large fruit, brownish-green skin and pink flesh, excellent fresh and very good for jam. A spreading tree.

### Deanna

A large fig suited to the fresh market, greenish skin, very popular in the USA.

### Archipal

A large greenish-yellow fig with a very thin, edible skin and honey-coloured flesh. Early to mid season. One of our best and most reliable bearers at The Food Forest.

### Flanders

A shy bearer, but good quality green skinned fruit with pink flesh.

### Black Genoa (San Piero)

A medium sized, pear-shaped fruit, purplish skin and red flesh, good for fresh eating but not suitable for drying. Vigorous tree, ripens Dec-Feb.

### White Genoa

Mid season and good in cool areas with large greenish-yellow fruit with amber flesh, good fresh eating variety and favoured for jam making. Light crop in Dec and more in Feb-Mar, unique flavour.

### Preston

Seems to have trouble maturing Dec-April, somewhat hairy, large green-brown fruit, white flesh, vigorous grower, high quality fruit.

### Brown Turkey

Medium sized, late season (March), brownish striped fruit with pinkish flesh. Excellent for jam. Second crop is main crop. Hardy tree.

### Spanish Dessert

Late maturing, spectacular dark purple skin and dark red flesh. It now seems quite likely that this is a fig that needs caprification..ie needs to be planted with a Capri fig for pollination.

### Yellow Ischia

Small, possibly useable for jam.

### Excel

Small, early season, light yellow skin, amber flesh, limited value for commercial market because of yields but good flavour for fresh eating.

### Celeste

Commercial variety in USA, violet skin, light coloured, firm flesh.

### Persian Prolific

Strong grower, mid season fruit, light purple skin and honey coloured flesh.

### Cape White

Early maturing, ripens Jan, medium-sized fruit, green skin, cream coloured flesh. Great for jam, compact tree.

### Sugar Fig

Is it another name for White Adriatic, the White Genoa or a separate variety? There is much confusion and misnaming of figs. Our Sugar fig is great for jam and drying and is a medium-sized, sweet, green-skinned variety obtained from a local nursery!

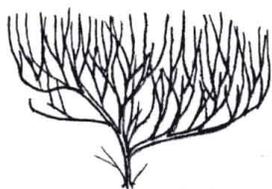
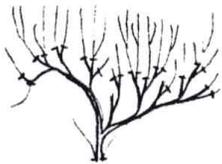
An Australian collector with an extensive collection of figs and a remarkable data-base on figs is Tony Stevens. Here is [a link to a list of his varieties.](#)

## Growing Figs

The fig is a deciduous, sub-tropical tree producing its best fruit in hot, fairly dry areas with extra water provided to the root system. The Riverland in South Australia provides the ideal climate. Too high summer temperatures can result in pulpless fruit and cool, damp conditions during ripening give rise to splitting and fungal attack. It doesn't like cold but can survive temperatures of minus 10 degrees C when dormant. Late frosts hurt it badly.

It is tolerant of alkaline soils of many textures but will not put up with wet feet or very acid soils (under pH 6). It is somewhat forgiving with respect to salinity accepting water of up to 1000 ppm salts.

Figs are not nearly as tough as many people would have you believe, so kid-glove treatment is in order for the first year in the ground particularly but even beyond that time they need plenty of water and fertilizer to be productive.



Drying Figs

The fig dislikes wind but loves creekside locations and high fertility sites (and is adept at cracking its way into underground sewer pipe systems).

However too much Nitrogen can cause excess leaf production and slower ripening of fruit. Its spreading root system is quite shallow and competitive, giving nearby trees a fairly hard time. It doesn't appreciate having its roots torn up by cultivation.

Prune the tree up on a single trunk of at least 75cm and don't allow sucker growth or you'll end up with an unpickable thicket. Generally annual pruning for form is all that is required. Bear in mind that the fruit is borne new wood. The Californians have some new-generation orchards which look almost like vineyards with the trees trained to just a couple of metres in height in a hedgerow. This helps with picking and with netting the trees.

Fig Leaf Mosaic is a common disease in figs and reduces vigour but does not lead to the death of trees.

On current prices you would not grow rich growing figs for the dried market and if you decided to chase the fresh market your bird netting arrangements would need to be of a high standard. Birds are enormous fig-lovers.

Figs often produce two crops annually; the early picking, often in about Dec, is known as the Breba crop (these are frequently big fruit) and the later picking is the Higos or main crop.

Traditionally figs for drying were allowed to drop on the ground to ensure absolute ripeness and maximum sugar. We tend to pick when the fig softens and droops. Judging ripeness in the Common fig is a bit of an art. The milky sap which oozes from the stem of unripe or not-quite-ripe figs when picked can be irritating to the skin, so you may want to wear gloves.

Drying is an efficient way of storing these very perishable fruit but you lose about 40% of the Vitamin C and B group by so doing. In his great book 'The complete book of growing fruit in Australia' Dr Louis Glowinski notes that, like dates, dried figs have so much sugar in them that diabetics are warned not to eat them.

### Propagating Figs - its easy

In the winter, when the fig trees have lost their leaves, take cuttings about 25cm long from the trees you want to multiply. This can be conveniently done when you are pruning trees. Make sure you label the bundle of cuttings from each variety.

To make sure your cuttings have their requirement for winter cold satisfied it is not a bad idea to put them in the fridge for 2 or 3 weeks (this doesn't seem completely necessary but helps set the wood's biological clock). This is also a way of temporary storage while you get propagation materials organised. To do this wrap the bundle of cuttings in damp newspaper and then put in a plastic bag in the fridge. Don't forget that it is there!

Striking the cuttings should be done in coarse sand or similar - plasterers sand or the commercially available propagation mixes work well - and the cuttings should be planted at least 2 or 3 buds deep (you only need a couple of buds above ground). Ensure that the cuttings are planted the right way up! You can do this in pots, bags or in the ground itself but I prefer to do it in containers so you can keep them all in one spot in the nursery for watering etc.

Before planting the bud sticks are dipped in one of the hormone powders or liquids that encourage root development (with indolebutyric acid - available through nurseries) and planted in the propagation material. Keep moist but not wet in a shady place until leaf shoots emerge and as the plant develops full leaves feed regularly with a fairly dilute liquid fertilizer. When it has a lot of leaves (maybe after a month or 2) carefully transplant (avoiding root damage) into a bigger container with potting mix. Keep in a shady spot for a week or 2 to avoid transplant shock. Grow on and plant the tree in the field the next winter.



End second year



End third year



End fourth year



Caprifigs



Bud-wood for propagation by striking is collected in winter. The figs would be removed to prevent the wood being exhausted



Remember to plant cuttings the right way up!

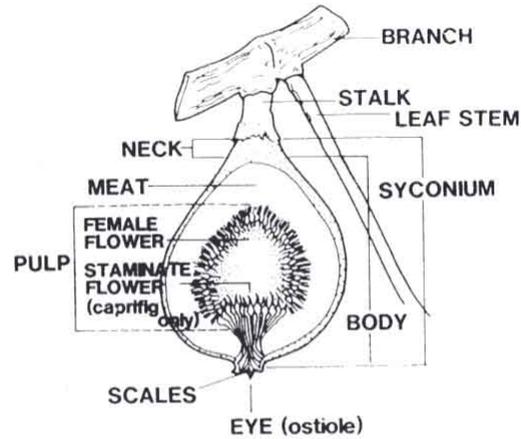


Unripe Capri figs which contain the pupae of the fig wasp for its overwintering phase

**Caprification - essential for the production of figs of some varieties**

Whilst most fig varieties are self fertile the San Pedro or Smyrna figs need to be pollinated by a Capri type fig. This is done by a tiny wasp which lays its eggs in the Capri fig and, when moving around inside the fig, ends up covered in its pollen. When the wasp flies around the orchard checking out other figs for laying sites it goes into other types of fig but finds them unsuitable for her purposes and leaves...but not before she has spread pollen from the Capri fig onto the female parts of the Smyrna or San Pedro type, so pollinating it.

**FIG FRUIT**



The parts of a fig are shown here.

**Figure 1.** Diagram of a fig fruit. (Univ. of California, Division of Agricultural Science, Leaflet 21051. 1978)

The fig is a peculiar fruit which is in fact a pretty much vegetative receptacle with thousands of tiny flowers inside it, each of which grows into a tiny fruit (but they are very small and all assembled together so we don't notice their separateness)



A fig wasp entering the 'eye' of a Capri fig



The pupae of the fig wasp inside the Capri fig. The male wasp emerges first, fertilizes the female wasp through the pupa case and then cuts a hole in the pupa case for the young (pre-fertilized) female wasp to emerge from



The wasp covered in Capri pollen fertilizes the Smyrna type fig

Acknowledgement is made for images drawn from the Fruit Gardener vol 23 6 1991

**The World's best fig recipe**

This is the most amazing and delicious way of keeping figs I've come across and was collected by my grandfather Tom Bowen who worked with dried fruit growers in the Riverland when figs were a significant crop up there.

**Grandfather Bowen's Figs**

6 lbs figs, 4lbs sugar, 2ozs ginger (half that will do), 6 wineglasses vinegar,  
1 wineglass water  
Boil figs in the above ingredients until clear (about 2 hours)  
Drain dry and press-roll in castor sugar  
Bake in hot oven for 5 minutes and allow to cool  
Store in an airtight container

**Feedback**

If you have any experiences or further useful information about fig varieties, recipes, cultivation etc please let me know so we can continue to improve this fact sheet for everyone's benefit.

**Links**

The best site on figs that I have found is Ray Givan's homepage (California) <http://web.infoave.net/%7Ethegivans/>

Other links may well be available through the California Rare Fruit Growers website at <http://www.crfg.org/>

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