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By Robert Kourik

Fabulous Figs

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Ask yourself: Are figs sinfully delicious, or just plain peculiar? It's one or the other for most of us. Those of us who agree with the former are attracted by the hedonistic potential of a sun-ripened, honey-dripping, rotund fig. I wait impatiently for them, and relish peak fig season, which occurs now, in mid- to late summer.

Fig trees have been cultivated for at least 5,000 years, and most likely they will be for another 5,000. Befitting its antiquity, this pear-shaped fruit is consumed many ways. A few examples: as fresh fruit, sugared and dried whole, cooked with lamb kabobs, fermented into wine, brandied, wrapped in prosciutto and drizzled with olive oil, made into jam, blended into every kind of cake, cookie, pastry and pie, dried into a paste, stuffed with sweet chocolate, and even pickled. In America, add to all of the above, stuffing fig paste between a cookie covering. Figs thus became "Newtonized."

**Where Figs Grow**

Fruit tree catalogs list fig trees (*Ficus carica*) as hardy throughout USDA Hardiness Zones 7b to 11 without protection, and in zones 4b to 7a with winter cover. But your yard's microclimate will determine whether a fig tree will flourish. Conservatively, figs are rated as hardy to 10oF to 15oF (zone 8a). At 10oF branch tips are damaged, and at 0oF they'll die to the ground but resprout the following spring.

Where fully winter-hardy, fig trees are very easy to grow. They are drought-tolerant and relatively disease- and pest-free. Granted, you won't find large, mature fig trees in Fargo, Taos, or St. Louis, but its range spans up the coastal lands of the Carolinas at least as far north as New Jersey, along the southern U. S. border, and into the upper third of California's seacoast. Given the support of some horticultural gymnastics, the fig range extends further up the Pacific Coast to Vancouver Island; into the high deserts of the West, such as El Paso; in the Midwest as far north as Chicago, and up the Atlantic Coast as far as Montreal.

**Winter Protection in the North**

In zones 4b to 7a, fig fanatics wrap their trees until they look more like a Christo fantasy than a plant. Others uproot their trees and bury them. If you want to try this, wait until late fall when the tree is dormant, then dig a hole about 2 feet deep, beginning 12 inches away from the trunk. After some judicious pruning, trim the rootball to size with your shovel and tilt the tree into the hole. Cover it with boards, some plastic sheeting to keep the tree dry, and plenty of soil, leaves, sawdust, or pine needles.

More permanent arrangements involve training the tree flat against a south-facing brick wall and covering it in winter with glass or plastic. But in every case, the goal is to insulate the wood to prevent dehydration and wind chill.

**When Figs Fruit**

In the most favorable regions, such as Hawaii or San Diego, some figs produce three crops a year. But in most areas, trees produce either a summer crop (also called the breba crop, from the Spanish brebathe, meaning "first crop") or a fall or main crop. The summer crop usually offers fewer but larger figs, compared with the fall crop.

In mild-summer areas, the summer crop may be the only one - early fall rains or cold can ruin the fall crop. In areas with long, hot summers, the fall crop may have sweeter and more richly flavored figs than the summer crop. At the northern extreme of fig territory, where trees are heavily pruned and wrapped prior to winter, expect only the fall crop.

Climate plays the major role in crop timing for most varieties, but cropping patterns are genetically determined in a few cases. For instance, 'Panachee' and 'Pasquale' produce fall crops only, while 'Kadota' and 'Mission' are noted for good production in both seasons.

### **Which Fig Tastes Best?**

Flavor is as always subjective, and making objective comparisons is logistically difficult. But I did informally survey various authorities and some pattern did emerge.

In the South, fig enthusiasts Diana Lalani at Hidden Springs Nursery in Cookeville, Tennessee, and Ray Givan of Savannah, Georgia, rate 'Celeste' "best flavored." Lalani considers 'Brown Turkey' a close second, and Givan follows with 'Alma', 'Hardy Chicago', 'Excel', and 'Flanders', in that order.

Howard Garrison, who maintains the USDA collection of more than 50 varieties of fig trees at the Wolfskill site near Davis, California, rates 'Panachee' as best flavored, followed by 'Brown Turkey.'

Photographer Saxon Holt and I were obligated to sample more than 20 fig varieties while taking the photos for this article. We agreed that 'Panachee' is at least among the top five. While it was our favorite that day, most fig aficionados interviewed for this article considered it in the second tier for flavor.

### **Soil, Drainage and Roots**

More than many common fruit trees, figs require good drainage. In wet clay or poorly drained soils, fig trees produce mostly vegetative, viny growth with few fruits. They tend to be short-lived.

Fig trees grow well in sandy loam to clay loam soil and seem to thrive in soils rocky enough to defy many plants, not to mention gardeners. In the Mediterranean, I've seen large, robust fig trees sprouting from craggy slopes and fractured rock cliffs. Rocky soils have another advantage: Gophers don't like them. This is important in the West, where the tunneling rodents are a worrisome pest of fig roots.

Figs tolerate soil pH between 6.0 and 7.8 and don't need as much fertility as most fruit trees. For instance, there is no need to fertilize a fig tree if new growth is longer than 6 inches. If growth is less than that, fertilize with 1 1/2 pounds of actual nitrogen per mature tree (7 to 8 pounds of blood meal or 10 pounds of 10-10-10). The best time to apply fertilizer is spring.

### **How to Plant and Care for Figs**

You can buy fig trees in containers or bare root. Bare-root trees are much cheaper and the only way to buy from a mail-order nursery, but they are also prone to dehydration during shipping.

Fig trees are not available on dwarfing rootstocks, so they grow to be full-sized. But full size varies according to climate and variety. Commercial fig trees in California, such as 'Mission', often grow to be 30 to 40 feet wide and nearly as tall. Others, such as 'Black Jack' are only 8 feet high and wide when mature, even in California. In cold-winter climates, fig trees are naturally smaller because of the necessity of heavy pruning for winter protection.

To ensure superior drainage, plant your fig tree in a raised bed or mound of soil elevated 18 to 24 inches high by 3 to 5 feet wide. Water to settle it and eliminate air pockets, and after planting, mulch.

The tender bark of a bare-root fig tree is susceptible to sunscald. Wash the trunk with water from the lower limbs to an inch below soil level, let it dry, then paint with white latex paint (interior or exterior) that's diluted 50 percent with water.

## Pests

The most widespread pest of figs is birds. You can either beat the birds to the ripe fruit by harvesting early each morning or cover the tree with netting. Gophers love to gnaw on fig roots. If they're common in your area, plant young trees in large wire baskets, leaving 12 inches of wire above the soil. Use traps to minimize gopher damage to mature trees.

Fruit "souring" is caused by bacteria and fungi entering the maturing fruit, usually via ants, beetles, and other small insects able to crawl into the fig's basal opening or "eye." Souring is most common in areas of high humidity. Varieties of figs are more or less prone to souring according to the size of their basal opening. If souring is a problem in your area, select varieties with a closed or nearly closed eye. Several are noted in the listing of varieties that follows.

Nematodes will parasitize fig roots and reduce your harvest. Minimize their damage by buying healthy, clean nursery trees and by maintaining an organic mulch over the root area of mature trees.

## Pollination

Common garden figs are self-fruiting, meaning they require no pollination. One exception to this pattern is the 'Calimyrna' fig, a commercial variety that requires a tiny wasp to crawl inside the undeveloped fruit and leave behind the pollen from another type of fig tree called a caprifig. Without pollen from the caprifig, the fruits of 'Calimyrna' do not mature.

## Pruning

Most figs can produce fruit on both the previous season's growth (1-year-old wood) and the growth of the current season. The crop from last year's growth matures in summer; the crop from the current season matures in fall.

What this means to the pruner is simple: 1) Prune in late fall or winter (spring in

cold-winter regions) and you'll just get the fall crop; 2) never prune and you'll harvest two crops; and 3) judicious pruning in both winter and summer will allow some of both crops - summer and fall.

Most often prune by making "thinning" cuts, not "heading" cuts. Thinning means cutting stems or shoots completely to their bases; heading cuts leave some portion of the stem or shoot. Prune by thinning to whatever shape you desire and some fruit will follow.

Old, mature fig trees can grow at least 40 feet tall in favorable climates. Many yards can't accommodate such large trees. To control the tree for a harvest without a ladder, simply cut back - to two or three buds on last year's growth - all shoots you want to save. Growers of figs for fresh fruit in the central valley of California routinely cut back fig trees to several buds. The trees can be decades old and yet are still below 10 feet tall and easily harvested without cumbersome ladders.

In zone 7b to 8b, it's convenient to maintain a fig in a bush rather than tree form. Cut out entire stems to the ground after they've grown more than 10 feet tall and 2 to 3 inches thick. Keep fig bushes open so summer light can ripen the crop, and in fall, prune to three older, grayer, hardier stems.

Fig trees ooze a white latex sap from pruning cuts. This sap contains an irritant called ficin that can cause dermatitis. Wear gloves, a long-sleeved shirt, full-length pants, a hat, and full-coverage eye goggles (not just glasses) when pruning fig trees, then wash thoroughly afterward.

## Which Fig?

The following section lists the 28 varieties of figs most commonly available in local nurseries or by mail. But be prepared to sort through the confusion of names. I attribute the abundance of names for the same variety in part to the tree's antiquity and in part to the ease with which it propagates: Foreign figs are introduced, forgotten, rediscovered, and renamed. So is it 'Celeste', 'Tennessee Mountain', or 'Sugar Fig'? Is 'Black Jack' the same as 'Petite Negri' or not? In many cases, no one knows for sure, even though some growers and fig lovers have very strong opinions.

I've also sought to standardize the words used to describe the fruit. In the following descriptions "strawberry" is the same as "rose" or "red" that you'll see in some catalogs. Likewise, I've used "brown" for varieties others describe as "bronze" or "mahogany," and "amber" for flesh color that some describe as "peach," "translucent," "white," or "honey."

## 28 Figs Described

### 'Adriatic'

Alternate names: 'Grosse Verte', 'Italian Strawberry', 'Nebian', 'Ventura', 'Verdone Hybrid Strawberry', 'Verdone', 'White Adriatic'

Skin and flesh colors: Green-yellow; strawberry

Where it grows: Widely adapted. Grows and produces well in San Francisco area.

Description: This is an old variety that reliably bears two crops annually.

Excellent fresh.

### **'Alma'**

Skin and flesh colors: Green-brown; amber

Where it grows: Recommended for Texas and southeastern U.S. Requires a long warm season to ripen.

Description: Average-sized fruit is very sweet and has small seeds. Small, frost-sensitive tree produces a good spring crop and heavy main crop. Nearly closed eye resists fruit souring. New variety developed in Texas.

### **'Beall'**

Skin and flesh colors: Brown; amber

Where it grows: Similar to 'Brown Turkey', but sweeter. Good spring and summer crops.

Description: Figs large, somewhat flattened shape.

### **'Black Jack'**

Alternate names: 'Black Spanish', 'Petite Negri'

Skin and flesh colors: Brown; strawberry

Where it grows: Recommended for Texas and southeast.

Description: Large figs produced on a small tree that is well suited to container growing.

### **'Brown Turkey'**

Alternate names: 'California Brown Turkey', 'San Pedro', 'San Piero'

Skin and flesh colors: Brown; amber

Where it grows: Highly recommended for California and the Southwest.

Description: Average- to large-sized fruits have few seeds and are best fresh.

Not recommended for drying or canning, this is one of the few figs grown for fresh market. They have a moderately open eye so are prone to souring in humid regions. Small tree is hardy and productive with two crops a year.

### **'Celeste'**

Alternate names: 'Blue Celeste', 'Celeste Violette', 'Celestial', 'Malta', 'Sugar Fig', 'Violette'

Skin and flesh colors: Strawberry-brown; strawberry

Where it grows: Very hardy and one of the most widely grown in the South.

Often disappointing in the West.

Description: Use small- to average- sized, crunchy and juicy figs fresh, dried, processed, or in preserves. Fruits resist both splitting and souring. Tree produces no spring crop.

### **'Conadria'**

Alternate names: 'Verdone', 'Verdone Hybrid'

Skin and flesh colors: Green-yellow; strawberry

Where it grows: Widely adapted. A hybrid developed in California.

Description: Average-sized figs are flavorful, crunchy, juicy, excellent fresh or dried. Fast-growing tree produces spring and summer crop.

### **'English Brown Turkey'**

Alternate names: 'Eastern Brown Turkey', 'Everbearing', 'Texas Everbearing'

Skin and flesh colors: Brown; strawberry

Where it grows: Recommended for cool summer regions such as coastal California and the Pacific Northwest. Also recommended for Texas and the Southwest.

Description: Average- to large-sized figs. Very productive and attractive tree.

### **'Excel'**

Alternate names: 'Dottato Hybrid', 'Kadota Hybrid'  
Skin and flesh colors: Green-yellow; amber  
Where it grows: Widely adapted throughout California and the Gulf Coast.  
Description: Compared with 'Kadota', figs larger and sweeter. Fruit resists souring by forming "honey drop" that plugs basal opening.

#### **'Flanders'**

Alternate names: 'Verdone Hybrid'  
Skin and flesh colors: Violet stripes; amber  
Where it grows: Widely adapted, producing well in both cool and hot regions.  
Description: Average-sized figs are somewhat elongated. Tree vigorous.

#### **'Genoa'**

Alternate names: 'Genoa White', 'White Naples'  
Skin and flesh colors: Green-yellow; amber  
Where it grows: Best in cool summer regions such as coastal California and the Pacific Northwest.  
Description: Average-sized figs are excellent fresh. The standard Italian fig.

#### **'Hardy Chicago'**

Skin and flesh colors: Brown-purple; strawberry  
Where it grows: A somewhat more cold-hardy tree, it is recommended for the upper South and coastal Atlantic regions.  
Description: Similar to 'Brown Turkey'. Small-sized tree is well suited to container culture.

#### **'Jelly'**

Alternate names: 'Mary Lane Seedless'  
Skin and flesh colors: Yellow; amber  
Where it grows: Best in regions of consistent weather and temperatures. In regions of weather extremes, fruits are prone to splitting.  
Description: Very juicy, nearly seedless fruit. Modern variety developed in California.

#### **'Kadota'**

Alternate names: 'Dattero', 'Dottato', 'White Kadota'  
Skin and flesh colors: Yellow-green; amber  
Where it grows: Best in hot, dry regions, such as California's Central Valley. A leading commercial fig in California.  
Description: Average-sized, tough-skinned, nearly se figs are used for canning, for drying, or eaten fresh. Vigorous, almost rampant tree is very productive in both spring and fall.

#### **'King'**

Alternate names: 'Desert King', 'White King'  
Skin and flesh colors: Green-yellow; amber  
Where it grows: One of the best varieties for coastal California and the Pacific Northwest. Also recommended for Gulf Coast regions.  
Description: Use these large figs fresh or dried. Good spring and fall crops.

#### **'Lattarula'**

Alternate names: 'Blanche', 'Italian Honey', 'Lemon', 'Marseilles'  
Skin and flesh colors: Yellow-green; amber  
Where it grows: Widely adapted but best in short-season, cool-summer regions.  
Description: High-quality, large and very sweet figs are excellent fresh, dried, or as preserves.

### **'L.S.U. Purple'**

Skin and flesh colors: Red-purple; amber

Where it grows: Developed in Louisiana and recommended for Gulf Coast region.

Description: These closed-eye figs resist souring. Tree is vigorous, cold-tolerant.

### **'Magnolia'**

Alternate names: 'Black Naples', 'Brunswick', 'Brunswick', 'Dalmatia', 'Dalmatian', 'Large White Turkey', 'Madonna'

Skin and flesh colors: Brown; amber

Where it grows: Widely grown in Texas and the Southwest.

Description: Souring-prone figs best for canning or preserves. Cold-hardy tree has distinctive hand-shaped leaves.

### **'Marseilles'**

Alternate names: 'Blanche', 'Lemon', 'Marseillaise', 'White Marseilles'

Skin and flesh colors: Yellow; amber

Where it grows: Cool regions such as coastal California and the Pacific Northwest. Also Atlantic Coast.

Description: Adapts well to containers.

### **'Mission'**

Alternate names: 'Black Mission', 'California Black', 'Franciscan', 'Franciscana', 'Negra'

Skin and flesh colors: Purple-black; strawberry

Where it grows: Very widely adapted variety grows and produces well in most regions.

Description: All-purpose fig is used fresh, dried, and for preserves. Tree often produces both spring and fall crops.

### **'Nero'**

Alternate names: 'Barnisotte', 'Brogiotto Nero', 'Ischia Black', 'Scavello'

Skin and flesh colors: Purple; strawberry

Where it grows: Grows well in most regions. More tolerant of cold than most fig varieties so recommended for marginal fig regions.

Description: This variety produces abundant crops of large figs at a young age.

### **'Osborn Prolific'**

Alternate names: 'Archipel', 'Hardy Prolific', 'Neveralla', 'Osborn', 'Osborn's Prolific', 'Rust'

Skin and flesh colors: Reddish brown; amber

Where it grows: Generally regarded as superior for cool regions, hence recommended for coastal California and inland valleys of southern California and the Pacific Northwest. Also recommended for the Atlantic Coast.

Description: Large, very sweet figs are best used fresh. Slow-growing, dense tree bears heavily.

### **'Panachee'**

Alternate names: 'Jaspee Limone', 'Panache', 'Striped Tiger', 'Variegato'

Skin and flesh colors: Yellow-green with stripes; strawberry

Where it grows: Needs long, warm growing season.

Description: Small- to average- sized figs have excellent fresh quality. Tree produces fall crop only.

### **'Pasquale'**

Alternate names: 'Vernino'

Skin and flesh colors: Purple; strawberry



Where it grows: More cold-tender than average so recommended only for frost-free regions.

Description: Use these small, very sweet figs fresh or dried. Tree produces good spring crop; fall crop ripens late.

#### 'Tena'

Alternate names: 'Tina'

Skin and flesh colors: Green-yellow; amber

Where it grows: Widely adapted, but especially well regarded in hot and dry regions.

Description: Figs are similar to 'Mission' but more rounded in shape. In some climates, figs will dry on the tree.

#### 'Tennessee Mountain'

Alternate name: 'Celeste'

Skin and flesh colors: Brown; amber

Where it grows: Recommended throughout upper South and Atlantic Coast.

Description: Use figs fresh or for preserves. Tree bears heavy crops of sweet figs.

#### 'Verte'

Alternate names: 'G Ischia', 'Ischia Green', 'New Verte'

Skin and flesh colors: Green; strawberry

Where it grows: One of the best for short-season, cool regions such as Pacific Northwest.

Description: Use these small figs fresh or dried. Tree is small, good for containers, and produces a spring crop. Ripe figs are less attractive to birds because they remain green.

#### 'Violette de Bordeaux'

Alternate names: 'Beer's Black', 'Bordeaux', 'Negronne', 'Petite Figue Violette'

Skin and flesh colors: Purple-black; strawberry

Where it grows: Widely adapted.

Description: Small fig with excellent flavor. Small tree adapts well to containers.

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