



by **Andy Firk**

owner of **Bamboo Grove** (Organic Tropical Bamboo & Fruits), Homestead,
Florida

& **Sunlife Organic Farm**, New York State

"Fresh organic figs will melt in your mouth and are a delight to the tastebuds. Plant varieties proven suitable for our sub-tropical climate in full sun, in rich soil, and keep them mulched and watered during the dry season. Prune to a manageable size." - **Andy Firk**

Fig, Ficus Carica, Moracea Family (the Mulberry family).

Last updated 9-14-2000

Native To: Mediterranean region/Asia minor/ western Asia.

History: Widely grown in ancient Greece & Rome. "Pliny listed 29 varieties in his day." "The Phoenicians probably introduced into India and China." "Areas producing the greatest quantities of figs commercially are Turkey, Greece, Italy, Algeria, Portugal and California." Recently, it has been planted on a commercial scale in new regions such as Madagascar, South Africa and Australia." "The famous Smyrna figs are said to have been produced for more than 2,000 years."

Description: a small, low spreading tree.

Varieties: There are said to be around 700 varieties of fig in the world. Specific varieties grown in South Florida include:

- **Celeste (aka Malta, Celestial, Blue Celeste, Little Brown Sugar):**
Fruit is small, purplish-bronze, light brown violet-colored, eye tightly

closed. Ripens from mid-June/mid-July to August/mid-August. Eaten fresh, it is considered the best for southern varieties. Trees will not bear fruit in seasons following severe freeze damage and tend to drop some of the crop during extremely hot weather.

- **Brown Turkey (Everbearing, Harrison, Ramsey, Lee's Perpetual, Brunswick, Common Purple, Brown Naples, Blue Burgundy, Eastern Brown Turkey, Black Spanish, Italian Everbearing):** a dwarf variety. Fruit is moderate size, bronze and open eye. Ripens from early July/July to late fall if growing conditions are good. Bears even after severe freezes. They have the longest ripening season of the recommended varieties.
- **Green Ischia (Ischia Verte, Ischia Green, White Ischia):** fruit is green which discourages birds, has closed eye. Ripens late mid-July/July to early August/August.
- **San Piero (Thomson, California Brown Turkey, Old Brown Turkey, Granata):** fruit is very large, purplish-black, purplish-bronze and open eyed. Doesn't drop at maturity but sours and splits. Ripens June through August. Pulp strawberry-colored. Worthless for drying. Best if left on tree to ripen.
- **Magnolia (Brunswick, Madonna):** very large/large bronze/straw-colored fruit with lopsided appearance. Amber colored pulp. Ripens early-July/mid-July to late August. The tree bears following severe freezes. This is the commercial 'canning' fig of Texas. Inferior for drying, excellent for preserving. Good fresh flavor, sweet and fairly rich.
- **Alma:** medium-sized, yellow to tan colored fruit, white pulp, very succulent and sweet, seed hulls hardly noticeable, excellent quality. Ripens in late July to early August. Tree compact & rounded with glossy leaves that are sparse. Introduced in 1974 by the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.
- **King (Desert King):** large dark green colored fruit. Pink flesh, excellent and sweet. Originated in Madera California by Sisto Pedrini. Introduced in 1940.
- **Jelly (Mary Jane):** medium-sized, yellowish-white fruit. Amber pulp, nearly seedless, sweet, ripens summer through fall. Good for fresh fruit. Originated in Escondido California by John Stevenson.

Mature Height: 12 feet on average, 12 inches wide. Some are 15 to 30 feet tall. Some dwarf varieties max out at 6 feet tall.

Light Requirements: Full sun.

Soil Preparation: Tolerant of various soils. rubble of brick, mortar and rock should be added to the planting spot. Soil should not be rich in nitrogen. Some

authorities recommend lots of manure, sawdust, leaf mulch or compost when enriching sandy soils.

Soil pH: Prefers alkaline soil. 5.5 to 8.0

Salt Tolerance: poor

Propagation: Easy to start from cuttings. Take a pencil-thin shoot 8 to 10 inches long. Treat the cut end with rooting powder and insert it several inches deep in a pot of vermiculite or loose potting soil. Moisten then enclose the cutting, pot and all, in a clear plastic bag. Set it in a shady area and leave it for 8 to 10 weeks until roots start to grow. Allow it to grow until the roots fill the pot then transplant to the landscape or a permanent container by cuttings or layering. Layer during the summer by bending a branch down to the soil, then secure with a stake and cover with soil. By fall it should be rooted and can be detached and planted elsewhere. Graft on *Ficus glomerata* or *F. gnaphthlacarpa* for nematode resistance. Cuttings from 2-3 year old wood. For cuttings, select short-jointed shoots of the previous years growth in spring some 6 to 9 inches long, preferable with a heel. Plant these in pots of sandy soil.

Container Growth: Figs are an excellent container plant, they produce many fruits when the roots are restricted.

Drainage: will withstand poor drainage.

Top Dressing: Keep mulched. Avoid using a nitrogen-rich mulch such as manure or compost. Instead use something more benign and less active. Some authorities recommend manure/compost mulch.

Rate of Growth: Fast/Rapid.

Watering: Regular watering during the dry or fruiting season is recommended. Figs like to be kept moist. Drought tolerant if soil is rich with organic matter.

Fertilization: feed with small amounts of mixed organic fertilizers once a month during growing season and watered well during fruiting season. A good and simple yearly tonic is to every square yard of border, apply 6 ozs. of basic slag, 1.5 ozs. of sulfate of potash each autumn. Every other year apply 8 ozs. of ground chalk. Not too much fertilizer. About 2 cups of 6-6-6 spread under the canopy of each plant is sufficient. Apply in late winter, mid-spring and late summer. Avoid feeding too late in the season as new growth needs to harden-off before cold weather.

Pruning: little pruning but a certain amount of pinching-out is demanded. Pruning consists only in cutting out the dead, deformed or weak branches, and perhaps any that are inconveniently placed. Cut these back to the main trunk to encourage new growth. Remember that figs come to maturity on new or recently ripened wood. As a plant grows, train it to three or four trunks. This keeps the tree open, letting in the sun that makes it more productive.

Care During the Growing Season: Responds to good care and fertilization. Likes plenty of regular watering during the fruiting period. When the fruit is bearing heavily, it is helpful to add a little tonic food in the form of some liquid manure.

Pollination: Growers who have heard that figs must be pollinated by a tiny wasp should know that this applies only to California varieties. Florida figs produce only female flowers and bear fruit without being pollinated. Figs produce flowers inside of their fruit! This makes pollination a special project of the fig wasp (*Blastophaga*) which enters through the tiny apex opening. It does not affect the fruit when eaten.

Harvest Season: Figs produce a main harvest in early summer and occasional fruit for several months thereafter.

Freezing: Freezes about 7 degrees F if dormant, young growth is very tender.

Pests: Birds...controlled by covering and netting. harvest figs each morning before birds feed, Sour Bugs enter open-eyed figs and destroy fruit. Pick them prior to maturity and ripen indoors. Nematodes are the greatest problem. These pests cause swollen roots which prevent plants from absorbing water and nutrients. Plants may lack vigor and show signs of nutrient deficiencies. Even with nematodes figs sometimes survive and continue to produce if they are well mulched and soil has been kept moist constantly. Planting your fig tree near cement walls gives better root growth conditions. Some work has been done grafting figs on *Ficus glomerata* stock. Results show they thrive in nematode-prone areas. Mix micorrhizal fungi into the soil to create a healthy, balanced, nematode resistant soil.

Diseases, Viruses, etc: Fig Rust can be a leaf problem when the crop lingers on. Mainly a problem during hot, humid months. It shows up first as brown spots on the foliage. In time, whole leaves decline and fall. To control this disease, spray with an (organic) fungicide that contains copper. Rare Fruit Growers in Miami tried removing terminals from branches, which produced an early crop

before fig rust became severe.

Harvest Dates: early summer to fall.

Nutritional Value: Fresh figs are rich in calcium, iron and Vitamin A and C. They are low in acid and high in natural sugars. Fresh figs contain some 80 percent water and 12 percent sugars, but when they are dried the sugar rises to 50 percent.

Fruit Storage: drying is the most common method

Shipping: Figs do not travel well if properly ripened.

Folklore: Good for preventing wrinkles. Mythology says, originated from the thunderbolt of Jupiter. To the Hebrews the fig symbolized abundance and peace. To the Egyptians it was the tree of life. For the Greeks, the appearance of new growth on the fig trees signaled the end of winter storms and the beginning of the sailing season.

-

References:

Cornucopia: A source Book of Edible Plants, Florida Fruit by Maxwell, Florida Home Grown 2: The Edible Landscape. Fruit for the Home and Garden by Johns & Stevenson, Growing & Using Exotic Foods by Van Atta

For further information contact Andy Firk at:
andyfirk@aol.com

Any questions or comments, contact me at: karen@gardenofhealth.com

©Andrew P. Firk

<http://web.archive.org/web/20050205023641/http://gardenofhealth.com/index.html>