

Hot figs to grow in cool places

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HOME & GARDEN



'Desert King' is a large fig with green skin - "the fig of choice for San Francisco."

Credit: Raintree Nursery

Season after season, year in and out, Linda Cicero gets her hopes up that finally, this time around, she'll harvest fruit from the fig tree outside her Noe Valley home in San Francisco. Instead, she reaps disappointment.

"We have a fig tree that does not do well, as the fruit never ripens," she laments. The variety is unknown, but probably it is not among the handful of fig cultivars that produce well in coastal weather.

While fig trees need heat, gardeners dwelling in the Golden State's chilly climates can plant 'Desert King,' 'Violette de Bordeaux,' 'White Marseilles' (sometimes sold as 'Lattarula'), 'Conadria' and 'Osborne Prolific' with expectations that they will mature. Coming soon: 'Olympian,' a newly discovered fig variety that survives, and even thrives, in Washington state's arctic environs.

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"We are cooler than you are and they produce here," says Burnt Ridge Nursery owner Michael Dolan, who plans to sell the newcomer at the Olympia farmers' market perhaps by next year. "We still need to build up our numbers," Dolan says. Described as a mandarin-size, purple-skinned fig with red- to violet-hued flesh, 'Olympian' is being touted as hardy and delicious. And at this point, scarce.

"The 'Olympian' was found to be something unique," says Malli Aradhya, a geneticist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Clonal Germplasm Repository near Davis. Aradhya says the new fig's molecular work was done by his laboratory using cuttings brought in by retired biologist Denny McGaughy, who discovered the tree and named it after the city where it stands in a sheltered location. Its genetic makeup did not match any of the 270 fig varieties in stock.

Primarily a research site, the repository may stock 'Olympian' in coming years and make it available to collectors, such as the California Rare Fruit Growers

But fig lovers in marine-like locales need not despair; they have proven fruit to plant in home gardens right now.

"The 'Desert King' is really the fig of choice for San Francisco," says C. Todd Kennedy, fruit registrar with the Rare Fruit Growers and co-owner of the Arboreum Co., a nursery in Philo (Mendocino County) specializing in rare heirloom fruit.

Fairly sweet fruit is produced by the tree, which in climates like San Francisco's could benefit from being situated along a fence (where it will not encroach on a neighbor) for its protection, or at another spot where a heat trap is created.

'White Marseilles' can produce two harvests in one season in San Francisco, says Kennedy. Figs tend to ripen from July to late summer.

'Desert King' and the other cool-weather figs start to form fruit the year before, then enter autumn with a

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"breba" crop: marble-size fruit that overwinters, giving them a big head start for the following season's crop, Dolan explains.

"Even the 'Brown Turkeys' (a type of fig) have pretty good success on the coast," says Ed Laivo of Devil Mountain nursery in San Ramon. Laivo is credited with rescuing several fig varieties from extinction. The sun-shy fig varieties are not tough for home gardeners to track down, Laivo says. "You can buy them everywhere."

Laivo, known for his high-density method of planting trees (for figs, two feet apart), has even braided the trunks of several figs that matured and produced well. A "how to" video of his braiding technique is on YouTube and can be viewed through the Dave Wilson nursery Web site, www.davewilson.com.

Known to reach enormous heights, fig trees can be cut back to a couple of feet when planting. Dolan even grows figs in a hedgerow format 7 feet apart "with no ladder work involved."

Cool fig choices

The following fig varieties thrive in maritime climates.

'Desert King': Large fruit with slightly mottled white spots on deep green skin covering strawberry-red pulp.

'White Marseilles' (a.k.a. 'Lattarula'): Lemon-color skin and yellow to amber flesh.

'Conadria' (a.k.a. 'Canadria'): Green skin and pink-yellow flesh, mildly sweet.

'Osborne Prolific': Purple to brown skin with amber flesh. "Really good tasting," according to Ed Laivo.

'Violette de Bordeaux': Purple to black skin with strawberry-color flesh, considered productive.

Coming soon: 'Olympian': Newly discovered variety that thrives in cool zones. Mandarin-size, purple-skinned fruit with red- to violet-hued flesh.

Planting tips

One of the easier fruits to grow, figs can even be planted in large containers and will produce fruit, typically in the second year, Michael Dolan says. While potted they may be stressed and thus be stimulated to produce growth.

Ed Laivo cites three figs as ideal for containers and coastal areas: 'Violette De Bordeaux,' 'Brown Turkey' and 'Black Jack.' He recommends a 24-inch-deep, faux terra cotta plastic pot. "I like the way they transfer heat," he says. They cool down quickly at night, unlike ceramic or clay models that can be ovenlike even when the sun goes down. And while half barrels provide good depth and width, they tend to fall apart, so

Laivo avoids them.

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