

Gulf Coast Fruit Study Newsletter

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Edited By: Ethan Natelson

Planning Committee:

Yvonne Gibbs
George McAfee
Doug McLeod
Rick Matt
Michael Morrison
Ethan Natelson
David Parish
Bob Randall

The Surinam Cherry

The Surinam cherry (***Eugenia uniflora***) is the most widely known of its edible-fruited species because of its greatly adaptable range. Also known as the Brazilian and Cayenne cherry and the pitanga, it is native to French Guiana and Surinam but has become naturalized in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia and may be spotted in Italy as well as the southern United States. It is generally grown as a shrub or hedge but may be established in tree form by repeated pruning, reaching 25 feet.

The plant has very shiny and attractive green leaves and the 1" in diameter fruit ranges in color from bright red to a dark maroon, and almost a black color. Plants germinate easily from seed and flourish here in Houston, where there may be two crops each year. Fruit quality apparently varies considerably, and some advocate obtaining cuttings from selected plants, rather than planting open pollinated seedlings. I had read in California Rare Fruit Growers (CRFG) Fruit Gardener Journal that the cherries

had an excellent flavor and was, therefore, unpleasantly surprised when I tasted my first crop. Apparently, the trick is to select very ripe fruit that separates easily from the plant. The fruit is halved and the seed removed and discarded. The cut fruit is then chilled for several hours allowing certain resinous and aromatic substances to dissipate. Some suggest that sugar be lightly sprinkled on the cut fruit surfaces. It can then be eaten out of hand or used in jellies. Fruit production varies, but a typical yield is cited at 6-8 pounds per plant.

Current Meeting:

Our program will begin at **7:00 p.m. on December 16, 2003** at the Extension offices at the Bear Creek Facility. We will have a citrus tasting, so bring any fruit you would like others to sample. Bob Randall will identify unknown citrus if you bring both leaves and fruit. The program will be on figs, and we will have free cuttings available.

Contact Us!

Harris Cty Extension Service
2 Abercrombie Road
Houston, TX 77080
Phone: 281/855-5611
Fax: 281/855-5638



Houston's Pied Piper of Fruit Cultivation

We would like to pay tribute to perhaps the one person most responsible for stimulating the popularity of backyard tree fruit cultivation in the Houston area and unselfishly imparting his wisdom and enthusiasm to generations of amateur pomologists. Dr. Leon Atlas is a native Houstonian and long-time local physician. Early in his career, he served as Director of Virology at the National Institutes of Health, and he was one of the original Internists in the Department of Medicine at Baylor Medical School. I don't know when Leon first developed his interest in horticulture, but it may have been stimulated by his father-in-law, who was Director of the United States Department of Agriculture.

For more than 20 years he held classes in January and February, at the Houston Arboretum, teaching grafting techniques, as well as the basics of fruit tree cultivation in-

cluding rootstock and cultivar selection for the Houston area. He established a number of relationships with notable fruit tree enthusiasts around the country, and by these friendships, he was able to secure unusual tree selections for trial in our area which he would then order and distribute from his backyard, since none were available through the local trade. His memory for names and characteristics of selected cultivars of many species was unmatched. He carefully prepared lists of each plant type, noting the required chill hours, fruit size, disease resistance, and many other features. Dr. Bob Randall recalls that he was a founder of Houston's Street Farmers' Co-op, in the 1970's, and he was an early member of both North American Fruit Explorers (NAFEX) and Southern Fruit Fellowship (SFF). Along with Ted Teddlie and Bill Adams, he helped promote our local organization, the

Gulf Coast Fruit Study Group. Prior to development of the experimental orchard at the Bear Creek facility by Bill Adams and Tom Leroy, Dr. Atlas' yard was the test plot containing apples, pears, kiwis, pecans, pawpaws and persimmons, and, therefore, a popular spot for resident squirrels and birds. Here he developed useful cultivars such as his **Honey** and **Pong Koa** mandarins and his **SuperOrient** pear.

As we pass this thanksgiving holiday, we should remember Dr. Atlas' important contributions to so many Houstonians. At this writing, he currently lives with his daughter Pam and son John, at 5618 Hazen, Houston, Texas 77081.

SPICED FIG DROP COOKIES

Recipe taken from *Fruit Gardener* (23: No. 6, Dec. 1991)

3/4 cup shortening	1 tsp. baking powder
1/2 cup brown sugar, packed down	1/2 tsp. baking soda
1/2 cup white sugar	1 1/2 tsp. allspice
2 eggs	1 tsp. cinnamon
1/2 cup stewed dried figs, drained and cut up	1/2 cup walnut meats, broken
3 cups flour, sifted	1/2 cup raisins or currants

Cream shortening, both sugars, eggs and figs together. Sift flour; measure and sift again with other dry ingredients; add nuts, raisins and flour mixture to creamed mixture; mix thoroughly. Drop from tsp. onto buttered cookie sheets; bake in moderate oven (375°F) for about 11 min. or until brown and firm to touch. Cool on wire cake racks. Store in tin box or glass jar. A stone crock will make these cookies too moist.

To stew figs: Rinse and drain figs; add boiling water to cover generously; cover pan and cook slowly over low heat for 35 min.; add piece of ginger root or cinnamon stick during cooking, if desired. Add sugar, if you wish, after cooking. Variations: slice orange for every 6 figs or 1 tsp. lemon juice and piece of lemon rind for every 4-5 figs; simmer 5 min. extra, serve warm.

Figs Found in the Houston Area

Cultivar names are very confusing when dealing with figs, and many different names have been applied to the same cultivar as it assumes slightly different characteristics and major differences in quality, when grown in variable climates. The names and descriptions below are of figs you might encounter in the Houston area:

Celeste (Malta, Sugar Fig): Extremely cold hardy. It is small to medium in size, a light bluish color with a reddish pulp and with a closed eye. It droops, when ripe. There are many sports of this fig, including **Improved Celeste**.

Kadota (Dottato): A greenish-yellow fig with a light amber pulp. Medium in size and syrup

exudes from the eye when ripe.

Mission: Black skin and reddish pulp, pear shaped fruit, but has open eye. A widely grown favorite with strong flavor. Many other black figs with different characteristics include **Negronne**, **Zidi**, **Black Ischia** and **Hardy Chicago**.

Conadria: Large, green-yellow skin and reddish pulp. Makes a very large tree.

Magnolia (Brunswick): Large, purple fig. Formerly, grown here for canning. Has open eye and may sour.

Jelly (Mary Lane Seedless): Large, yellow-green skin, yellow pulp.

California Brown Turkey: Large, purple fig with open eye. Low sugar content.

LSU Purple: Medium sized, closed eye purple fig with red pulp. Excellent production.

Alma: Fruit is medium sized with a light yellow exterior and amber flesh. Small eye. Cold sensitive.

Tena: Light-green fruit with amber pink flesh. High quality.

King: Large greenish fruit with red pulp. A winner in Southeast, but only fair here.

Royal Vineyard: Resembles LSU Purple in external color and shape, but has a lighter interior and is not as cold hardy or as good quality.

Deanna: Large fig with light exterior and yellowish-red pulp.

FRESH FIG BREAD

Recipe taken from *Fruit Gardener* (23: No. 6, Dec. 1991)

1 1/2 cups light or dark figs, stemmed and coarsely chopped
 1/4 cup dry sherry
 1 2/3 cup flour
 1/2 cup chopped walnuts
 1 tsp. nutmeg
 1 tsp. cinnamon
 1 tsp. baking soda
 1/2 tsp. salt
 1 1/2 cup sugar
 1/2 cup salad oil
 2 eggs

Combine figs and sherry; let stand 15 minutes. Mix together flour, walnuts, cinnamon, nutmeg, baking soda and salt. In a mixer bowl, beat sugar, oil and eggs to mix; blend in flour mixture; gently stir in figs and sherry; pour batter into well-greased loaf pan; bake at 350°F for 1 1/4 hours or until bread feels firm when gently pressed in center. Cool in pan 10 minutes, then invert onto a rack. Bread can be frozen for later use.

HARRIS COUNTY
MASTER GARDENER ASSOCIATION
2 ABERCROMBIE DRIVE
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