



Louisiana Figs

The fig was one of the first fruits cultivated by ancient peoples. It is a native of Asia Minor, and when taken to Greece and other Mediterranean countries, became so widely used fresh and dried that it was known as the “poor man’s food.” The fig tree was imported to the United States sometime during the 16th century, and it grows well in the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast areas and in parts of California. Figs are one of the most popular fruits grown in Southern backyards.

Fruits of fig trees are hollow with the flowers located inside. The eye, or ostiole, is a small opening located at the end of the fig that enables the fig wasp to enter the fig fruit for pollination. The fig wasp does not exist in Louisiana; therefore, fruit is only produced by varieties that do not require pollination. Since the opening is not needed for the fig wasp, it has been possible to select for figs that have closed or plugged eye.

A closed eye on the fruit is an important characteristic for the humid South. Figs with open eyes often sour during rainy weather. Some varieties with open eyes, however, are grown in the South and harvested before full maturity for use in making preserves. Cold hardiness of trees is also a valuable trait, especially in North Louisiana.

Varieties

Celeste

The popular Celeste is a hardy fig variety that grows well throughout the state. The fruit is small to medium and is purplish-bronze to light brown with a light strawberry-colored pulp. The fruit has a closed eye and ripens in late June and July. Celeste is excellent for eating fresh, canning and preserving.

Southeastern Brown Turkey

The Southeastern Brown Turkey, also known as Texas Everbearing, is a larger fig than Celeste. It has a copper or bronze skin and an amber pulp. A small breba crop of large figs usually ripens about two weeks before Celeste, followed by the main crop of medium-size figs two to three weeks after Celeste. The small eye has a reddish color from a very early stage. The fruit is good fresh and is excellent for processing.

Hunt

The Hunt fig is a bronze-to-brown pear-shaped fruit with a short neck and a long slender stalk, which allows the fruit to droop. The fruit is larger than Celeste with amber to pink pulp and few seeds. The fruit has a closed eye and begins to ripen about 10 days later than Celeste. Although Hunt continues to produce fruit about two weeks longer than Celeste, it is not a heavy bearer. It is, however, well-adapted to the rainier areas of Louisiana. The fresh fruit quality is similar to that of Celeste.

Kadota

Kadota, sometimes known as Florentine, is a medium to large yellow fig that ripens at the same time as Hunt. The fruit has an open eye that is sealed with a honeylike substance. During rainy weather, the fruits split and may sour before becoming ripe enough to eat.

Kadota is fair for eating fresh, but excellent for canning and preserves.

LSU Purple

LSU Purple is medium-size, long, turbinate, glossy reddish to dark purple fig that has light amber to light strawberry-colored pulp and a closed eye. A heavy main crop is produced in July followed by a later crop that often lasts into December. The mild flavor is good, and the fruit has high sugar content.

LSU Gold

LSU Gold is a large yellow fig with light red to pink pulp. Because the fruit has an open eye when mature, it should be picked as soon as it reaches maturity because fruit spoilage may occur during ripening in high moisture periods. LSU Gold has good quality for eating fresh and preserving.

Alma

Alma is a medium to large pear-shaped to round fig with a light tan to brown skin and a light tan pulp. The eye is medium and self-sealing with drops of gum. The tree is highly productive with fruit ripening from late July through August. The fruit has few seed hulls and is very sweet.

Hardy Chicago

Hardy Chicago is a small- to medium-size fruit with blackish purple skin and a strawberry-colored pulp. The

fruit is firm and holds up well during handling, processing and rainy weather. The fruit has a small eye and ripens five to seven days after Celeste.

O'Rourke

O'Rourke, a new LSU fig, is sometimes known as Improved Celeste. It is medium-size, tan to brown, has a tan pulp and tapers slightly toward the stem end with a long neck. The eye is partially closed. The fruit ripens five to seven days before Celeste and continues over a 15-day period.

Champagne

Champagne, a new LSU fig, is sometimes known as Golden Celeste. The medium-size fruit has a yellow skin, a tan to caramel-colored pulp and a partially closed eye. The fruit ripens about the same time as Celeste.

Tiger

Tiger, a new LSU fig, is sometimes known as Giant Celeste. It has a large brown fruit, yellow to gold pulp and a partially closed eye. Fruit ripens five to seven days after Celeste and continues over a 15-day period.

Nutritional Value

Figs are a good source of fruit sugars for energy. A small, fresh fig (1 1/2 inches in diameter) contains 30 calories; a medium fig has 37 calories. Figs are low in fat, saturated fat and sodium and are cholesterol-free. They are a good source of dietary fiber, natural sugars, iron, calcium and potassium. They have a laxative effect because of the roughage of the seedy fiber and to a proteolytic enzyme, ficin.

Fig Facts

- Figs contain a natural proteolytic enzyme, ficin (this is why fig juice might irritate the skin).
- Gelatin salads will not set if raw figs are added because the natural enzyme, ficin, breaks down the gelatin (which is protein). Heat inactivates the enzyme.
- Ascorbic acid or a commercial color control mixture added to figs helps protect the color during storage.

Fresh Figs

Enjoy fresh figs while they last for eating "out-of-hand"; as a morning eye-opener served chilled and sliced in a bowl with yogurt; in fruit salads; in homemade ice cream; and as a dessert or snack.

Freezing Figs

Figs freeze well with or without sugar, peeled or unpeeled. They should be fully ripe for best flavor.

Wash ripe figs thoroughly, remove stems, peel if desired, leave whole or cut in half. Freeze with or without sugar syrup.

Freeze figs firm-ripe and whole for making preserves later.

In syrup: Make syrup by dissolving 1 cup sugar in 2 cups water. Allow 1 cup syrup for each quart of figs. To keep fruit from darkening, stir 3/4 teaspoon of crystalline ascorbic acid into each quart of syrup, or use a commercial ascorbic acid mixture according to instructions on label. Fill containers about 1/4 full of syrup; pack fresh figs solidly in container. Cover with syrup, leaving 1 inch headspace. Crumple waxed paper and place on top of figs in headspace. This helps keep figs under syrup. Seal airtight. Freeze immediately; store at zero degrees F.

Without sugar: Sprinkle figs with ascorbic acid mixture dissolved in a little water. Place figs on a baking sheet; freeze quickly. Remove individually frozen figs and pack tightly in freezer bags or containers. Avoid air pockets between figs, if possible. Crumple waxed paper and place in headspace, or cover surface snugly with plastic film. Seal airtight and store in freezer at zero F.

Freezing for preserves: If you prefer to "clean" unpeeled figs before making preserves, bring figs to a boil in hot water, let stand 3 to 4 minutes, drain. Cool and freeze.

Home Processed

Simple methods of food preservation can help you enjoy figs all year long.

Grandma's Fig Preserves

2 quarts peeled figs 6 cups sugar
2 cups water 1 lemon, sliced

Sort figs, using ripe figs but not cracked ones. Wash and peel with a sharp knife, wearing rubber gloves.

Make a heavy syrup of sugar and water in a large kettle. Stir and heat slowly until sugar is dissolved. Increase heat and bring to a boil 3 or 4 minutes. Add sliced lemon and peeled figs. Cook on medium heat (a good, but gentle boil) until clear and transparent, usually about 1 1/2 hours. Do not stir; lift gently from bottom or shake pot. Fill sterilized jars with boiling figs and syrup to within 1/4 inch of top. Wipe sealing edge clean and seal. Process in hot water bath at simmering temperature (180 F) 10 minutes.

Peeling figs takes longer, but once you taste the beautiful, clear preserves, you will agree it's worth the time.

If figs are not peeled, wash, drain and cook the same way. For a brighter color, clean figs by bringing to a boil in hot water. Let stand 3 minutes; drain, then add to boiling syrup.

Using frozen figs: Place frozen figs in large kettle, add sugar and water and heat slowly until figs thaw. Add sliced lemon if desired, bring to a boil and cook as above.

Strawberry-flavored Fig Jam

When figs are very ripe, try this recipe for fig jam (strawberry- or blackberry- flavored).

6 cups mashed figs (about 9 heaping cups, whole)
6 cups sugar
4 small package (2 large) strawberry-flavored gelatin
½ lemon, sliced

Add sugar, gelatin and lemon to figs. Bring slowly to boil, and boil 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Fill sterilized jars to within 1/4 inch of top and seal. Process in water bath at simmering temperature (180 F) for 10 minutes.

Canned Figs

7 pounds ripe figs (5 to 6 quarts)
2 bottles white corn syrup
2 cups sugar
1 tablespoon lemon juice per quart

Wash figs and thoroughly; drain.* Place in large kettle; add sugar and corn syrup. Heat slowly until water cooks from figs to make syrup. Boil gently for 1 to 1½ hours. Fill clean, hot jars to within ½ inch of top; add lemon juice. Wipe sealing edge clean, adjust jar lids and seal. Process in boiling water bath 45 minutes for pints and 50 minutes for quarts.

**Cleaning figs:* Do not use soda for cleaning; it could make figs unsafe when canned in a boiling water bath. Instead, bring figs to boil in hot water; let stand 3 to 4 minutes; drain. This process removes the “milk” from the skins and brightens them. This step is not necessary, however.



Pickled Figs

Select firm, ripe figs. Wash thoroughly and drain or clean in boiling water as above. Cook figs until tender in a syrup made from 2 cups of sugar to 1 quart of water.

When figs are tender, add remaining 4 cups sugar, vinegar and cinnamon, cloves and allspice tied in a bag and mace. Cook until figs are clear and transparent. Allow to stand in syrup overnight. Pack fruit into clean jars: cover with syrup to within ½ inch of top. Wipe sealing edge clean; adjust lids. Process pint jars in boiling water bath for 20 minutes.

5 quarts figs
1 quart water
6 cups sugar
1 pint vinegar
1 tablespoon stick cinnamon, broken
1 tablespoon whole cloves
1 tablespoon whole allspice
1 teaspoon mace

Oven-dried Figs

A space-saver. A candied-type product, rich in flavor. Great for snacks; for baking cookies and cakes, muffins or breads.

Ripe figs
Sugar syrup made from:
1 cup sugar
3 cup water

Wash figs. Dissolve sugar in water; bring to boil. Add figs and simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from heat: let figs stand in syrup 10 minutes. Lift out, drain and cool. Place in single layer on drying rack (a broiler-pan rack or cake rack will do). Set oven at lowest temperature. A low, even temperature of 115 F to 120 F should be maintained for about 10 to 20 hours. Leave door propped open slightly for moisture to escape. A small fan aired inside the oven will shorten drying time. If a gas oven is used, be sure that it doesn't go out.

Figs should be dried until the outsides are firm to the touch, and the insides soft with no signs of syrup when squeezed. It won't be difficult to learn when they are dried -- at most any stage, they can be used.

Dried Figs

Select fully ripe fruit. Wash or clean well with a damp towel. Peel dark-skinned varieties if desired. Leave whole if small or partly dried on tree; cut large figs in halves or slices. If drying whole figs, crack skins by dipping in boiling water for 30 seconds. For cut figs, dip in ascorbic acid or other antimicrobial solution for 10 minutes. Remove and drain well. Arrange in single layers on trays.

Dry at 140 F in an oven or dehydrator until leathery and pliable. The length of time needed to dry the figs depends on the size of the pieces being dried, humidity and the amount of air circulation in the dehydrator or oven. Also, products generally will dry more quickly in convection ovens or electric dehydrators than in conventional ovens. Figs should be dried until the outsides are firm to the touch, and the insides soft with no signs of syrup when squeezed.

Sun-dried Figs (An energy saver!)

Figs dry well outside on hot, sunny days. They should dry in about two days. Bring in at sundown. They also dry well inside a car parked in the sun, with a window opened about 1 inch. Fully ripe figs are sweeter, more flavorful when dried.

Wash ripe figs, leaving stems on. Cut completely in half to stem. Turn cut side up on drying rack. Cover with a piece of cheesecloth or nylon net to keep insects off. Put drying rack on table, car, roof, etc. In full sun. Dry until outside is leathery but pliable. Inside should be soft, with no sign of juice.

Storing Dried Figs

Fruit that might have been exposed to insects (including fruit flies and Indian meal moths) before or during the drying process should be pasteurized to destroy insect eggs. To destroy insects, place packaged figs in freezer for 48 hours. Remove and package promptly for permanent storage. You can also pasteurize fruit by placing in a 150 F oven for 30 minutes. Cool.

Pack cooled, dried fruit in small amounts in dry, scalded glass jars (preferably dark) or in moisture- and vapor-proof freezer containers, boxes or bags. Storage life will be increased if they are stored in the refrigerator or freezer in moisture-proof bags or containers.

Examine figs occasionally when they are stored at room temperature. If there are signs of moisture, reheat, cool and repack.

Fig-filled Cookies

½ cup shortening
½ cup brown sugar
½ cup white sugar
2 eggs
2 cup flour
¾ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon soda
1 teaspoon vanilla

Cream shortening; add sugars, beat until fluffy. Add eggs, mix well. Sift together dry ingredients; add to egg mixture. Stir in vanilla. Chill thoroughly (dough is very sticky). Roll ¼-inch thick on floured surface. Cut with floured cookie cutter. Place a teaspoon of filling on one cookie; top with another and press edges together with floured fork tines, or put filling on one half of cookie, fold other half over. Press edges together. Bake on greased cookie sheet in 400 F oven about 10 minutes.

Make your own Fig Newtons.

Roll dough in narrow rectangles, spread filling on one side, fold other half over, bake and cut in bars.

Filling

1 cup chopped dried figs* (snip with kitchen scissors)
1/4 cup sugar
1/3 cup water
½ cup chopped pecans (optional)
1 tablespoon lemon juice

Cook figs, sugar and water until thick, stirring often (about 5 minutes). Add nuts and lemon juice. Cool.

*Or dates or fig preserves, drained.

Fig Cake

1 spice cake mix, sifted
4 medium or small eggs (3 large)
1 box instant vanilla pudding
1 cup water
½ cup oil
¾ cup chopped fig preserves
½ cup chopped pecans (optional)

Mix the first five ingredients, fold in figs and nuts. Pour into greased and floured tube pan and bake at 350 F for about 40-45 minutes, or until done. Glaze if desired. Stays moist. Freezes well. Delicious warm with a warm lemon sauce.

References

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Authors:

Connie Q. Aclin
Assistant Extension Agent (Nutrition)
Caddo, Bossier & DeSoto Parishes

John Pyzner
Associate Professor (Fruit and Pecan)
Pecan Research-Extension Station

Beth Reames, PhD, LDN, RD
Professor and Extension Specialist
(Nutrition and Health)

Ruth Patrick, PhD (retired)

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Louisiana State University Agricultural Center
William B. Richardson, Chancellor
Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station
David Boethel, Vice Chancellor and Director
Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service
Paul D. Coreil, Vice Chancellor and Director

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