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Seduction by fig

By Russ Parsons, Times Staff Writer
September 06, 2006

Furthermore, unlike other tree fruits, which bear only one crop every year, most figs produce fruit twice. The first crop, called breba, appears in the spring and early summer on the previous year's growth and is smaller in number, although the fruit is large in size and sometimes -- though not always -- a little sweeter. The second, main crop appears in late summer and early fall, right about now.

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The fresh and dried fig businesses are inextricably intertwined. Not only are they grown by the same people, but until now they've almost always been grown on the same trees.

Dried figs are harvested in much the same way as they have been for centuries. The fruit ripens and dries on the tree until it is too heavy for the stem to support it. After it falls or is shaken to the ground, it is raked to the center of the row and left to sun dry a little longer. Then all of the dried figs are swept together to finish the process.

Fresh figs are taken from the same trees, but they are picked before the fruit has begun to dry. "What we usually do is pick around the circumference of the trees until the fruit starts falling to the ground on its own and we're stepping on them," says Kevin Herman, co-owner with his wife of the Specialty Crop Co., one of the largest growers of figs in the state. "That's when we send everything else to dried."

That sounds simple, but in practice it is a lot more complicated. Because ripe fresh figs are so fragile, they must be clipped from the tree one at a time rather than being plucked from the branch as most fruits are. And to keep them from being squashed by their own weight, they are collected in 1-

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gallon containers rather than in big buckets.

Finally, rather than being shipped to a main packing shed to be sorted into boxes, the figs are packed right in the field, on wooden tables under tents. They go straight from the field to the refrigerated warehouse and then to the store. Each tree needs to be picked at least every other day during the harvest period, which can last several months.

Growers bet on fresh

RECENTLY, Herman and Richard DeBenedetto, the other major grower of figs in the state (between them they farm about 7,000 of California's 12,000 total acres), have put in orchards that will be dedicated to the fresh market. These high-density plantings allow for as many as three times more trees per acre, but the close spacing will make it nearly impossible to harvest the figs for drying.

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