

In the Arboretum Today

By Alfrdo Chiri

White Fig moraceae

Var. Blanche donated by: CRFG and planted in 1983 (r.f.-07)

Common name: Higo blanco, Italian honey fig, Latttarula, White marseille

The fig tree is believed to be indigenous to Western Asia and distributed throughout the Mediterranean area. The fig tree grows best in dryer, warm, temperate climates. Rain during fruit development and ripening can cause fruits to split. In wetter, cooler areas the fig will also grow. Dormant trees are hardy to 12° F, but plants in active growth can be damaged at 30° F. Chilling requirements for the fig are less than 300 hours.

Although the fig tree is generally thought of as a subtropical plant suited to the mild winters and heat of California, there are varieties that will bear fruit in the milder climates of the Northwest. If a freeze knocks down the plant, it sprouts again quickly.

The fig tree is a picturesque deciduous tree that will grow in height up to 50 feet in the wild, but typically is controlled to 10 to 15 feet tall. Figs grow as many-stemmed shrubs, reaching 10 feet in warm years. In warm climates the trees grow on one or several trunks and reach 20 to 25 feet, spreading wide.

Branches of the fig tree are thick and twisting and spreading wider than they are tall. Fig wood is weak and decays rapidly. The sap contains copious milky latex that can be irritating to human skin.

The fig tree leaves are bright green, single, alternate and large (to 12 inches in length) with 1 to 5 lobes, rough hairy on the upper surface and soft hairy on the underside.

Figs are not quite fruits. They are a collection of inside-out flowers with all the important parts accessible to the outside world through a hole at the base. The first crop, called the "breba crop," blooms on the new wood of the previous season. The second crop, known as "main crop," appears on the new wood of the current season. When the tree is cut back, most of the first crop is lost.

The mature "fruit" has a tough peel, often cracking when ripe, exposing the pulp. The interior has a white inner rind containing a seed mass surrounded by jelly-like flesh. The seeds are numerous and generally hollow if they are sterile, but pollinated seeds give to dried figs the characteristic nutty taste.

Fig trees require full sun all day to produce palatable fruits. Young trees should be watered regularly until fully established. In dry western climates mature trees should be watered deeply at least once a week.

Desert areas will require being watered more often.

The Blanche fig tree is known as a medium-to-large fig. The skin is yellowish green, and the flesh is white to amber, very sweet, with a lemon flavor. It has a light "breba crop." It likes cool-summer areas. It is a slow-growing, dense, and hardy tree.