

Florida Food Fare

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Figs

Description: A native of western Asia and the Mediterranean area, the fig is one of the earliest fruits known to man. It is estimated that they have been around for at least 6,000 years. The fig, a member of the mulberry family, is one of the sweetest fruits when fully ripe. Figs are not generally grown commercially in Florida because they are so perishable, but rather enjoyed as a dooryard fruit. The common varieties in Florida include; Celeste, a small purplish-bronze to light brown fruit with closed "eye"; Brown Turkey, a moderate sized bronze fruit with medium "eye"; and Green Ischia, a green color with a closed "eye".

Availability: Fresh figs are available from June through October. They do not ship well so local fruit will most likely be found in the markets. Celeste figs ripen from mid July to mid August, while Brown Turkey ripens late July until late fall and Green Ischia late July to early August. Figs are sold dried and candied in the supermarket, particularly around the holidays.

Nutritional Value: Figs are high in dietary fiber and are a rich source of magnesium and potassium. They are also relatively high in vitamins A, B, and C and low in calories, about 50 calories each. One large raw fig, approximately 65 grams is 77.5 percent water, yields .8g protein, .2g total fat, 23mg calcium, .4mg Iron, 50 IU vitamin A, 2.1g dietary fiber, 3.8mcg folate, .3mg niacin, and 1mg vitamin C.

Selection and Care: Fresh figs must be fully ripe to be of good quality. Green ones will shrivel when cooked. Ripeness or maturity cannot be judged by size. A ripe fig is rather soft and varies in color according to variety. Pick just as the skin begins to break. Be careful not to bruise the fruit, as this will make it spoil very quickly. Avoid overripe figs detectable by their sour odor, a sign of fermentation.

Fresh figs are highly perishable. Try to pick the fruit daily and either use or preserve it the same day for best quality and flavor. If you must store figs overnight, place in a single layer in a shallow container in the coldest part of the refrigerator. For longer storage, fresh figs may be frozen for up to 6 months. They can also be dried, candied or canned in syrup.

Preparation and Use: To use figs, remove the stem ends and halve, chop or slice, according to your recipe. Because their skins are edible, figs do not require peeling. Figs are a favorite breakfast fruit, and make a delightfully sweet addition to appetizers, salads or desserts. For variety, add chopped figs to your favorite bread or rice-stuffing recipe. Because figs are high in pectin, they are ideal for jams and preserves.

To dry figs, sort, wash and remove stems. Halve or slice figs into uniform pieces. They may be pretreated if they are to be sundried, by sulfuring them for 1 hour to discourage insects. Place figs skin side down on trays in the sun. Cover with clear protective sheeting. Bring fruit inside at night. Drying time is 1-3 days depending on size of fruit pieces and weather. Figs are dry when they feel leathery and show no pockets of moisture. Store in airtight containers. They may also be dried in the oven at a very low temperature, with the door open, or in an electric dehydrator.

Recipes:

Old Fashioned Fig Jam

1 quart fresh figs 3 tablespoons lemon juice
2 cups sugar

Wash figs, drain and clip off stems. Add sugar and mash with a potato masher. Add lemon juice. Cook slowly to avoid scorching. Using a candy thermometer, heat until it reaches 220 degrees F. Pack into clean canning jars, leaving 1/2 inch headspace. Process in boiling water bath for 15 minutes.

Stuffed Figs Appetizer

4 ounces Neufchatel cheese 1/4 teaspoon paprika
Skim or lowfat milk to moisten 12 large figs
1/3 cup nuts, chopped Lettuce
1/3 cup celery, chopped

Soften cheese with milk to make a paste. Add nuts, celery and paprika. Mix, remove stems from figs. Cut in half lengthwise. Scoop out some of inside and fill cavity with cheese mixture. Arrange 3 stuffed figs on lettuce and serve cold as an

appetizer or salad. Yield 4 servings.

Fresh Fig Fruit Salad

1 cup bananas, sliced	2 oranges, sectioned
1/4 cup orange juice	1/2 cup pecans, chopped
1 cup cantaloupe balls	1/2 cup celery, diced
3 cups fresh figs, peeled, sliced	

Cover sliced bananas with orange juice. Combine bananas, cantaloupe balls, sliced figs, orange sections, nuts and celery. Mix lightly. Chill thoroughly. Garnish with whole ripe fig. Yield 6-7 servings.

Fig Sauce

12 to 15 fresh ripe figs, peeled	1 tablespoon butter
1/2 cup sugar	1 tablespoon cornstarch
1 cup water	3 tablespoons lemon or orange juice

Combine figs, sugar, water, and butter in saucepan. Bring to boil, simmer until figs are tender, 5 to 8 minutes. Combine cornstarch and fruit juice. Mix until smooth. Stir into fig mixture; cook over low heat, stirring constantly until thick. Serve warm over ice cream, pound cake, angel cake or bread pudding. Yield 3 1/2 cups.