



## Figs: A Mediterranean Favourite

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By Jennifer Gay, [Athens News](#)

**With their shady tropical leaves and resistance to heat and drought, these muscular trees are ideal for inhospitable Greek gardens – and their succulent fruits are scrumptiously sweet and juicy**

VERY soon, delicious fresh figs will be coming into season. Though they are more commonly eaten dried, there is nothing quite like a fresh fig plucked straight from the tree. Known botanically as *Ficus carica* (belonging to the same family as the Mulberry, Moraceae), and in Greek as *sykia*, this is a rather unique tree in a usually evergreen genus containing over 1,000 species, many of which are tropical giant “rubber trees”.

The edible fig is believed to be indigenous to western Asia, but was distributed by humans throughout the Mediterranean so long ago that it could almost be regarded as native here. Evidence of fig cultivation has been found in excavations of Neolithic sites as early as 5,000 BC. It is not certain exactly when the fig came to Greece; mythology tells us that the goddess of the harvest, Demeter, created the fig tree. Figs were an important part of the basic diet of the ancient Greeks, and like the olive and vine, a symbol of peace and prosperity. Nowadays, the distribution of the fig ranges from Afghanistan to the south of Germany and the Canary Islands.



The fig is not usually a huge tree (3-9m high) but can reach 15m on occasion. The muscular branches twist and turn, spreading wider than they are tall. Where branches have broken off or been removed, large nodal tumours often form; the wood is not tough, decaying rapidly. The roots do not, as a rule, travel deeply, but horizontally, extending far from the tree, sometimes covering 15m of ground. The deciduous leaves lend a tropical feel to the garden: they are bright green, palmate, and deeply divided into lobes.

But the fruit is the intriguing feature of this useful shade tree;

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“fruit” is in fact, a misnomer, as it is technically a synconium, a fleshy, hollow receptacle with a small opening at the apex through which pollinating insects gain access. The synconium is pear-shaped, varying in colour from yellowish-green to brown, bronze, red or dark-purple, and the tiny flowers are massed on the inside wall.

In figs that are not self-fertilising, pollination is quite an intricate process; it is carried out by a special gall wasp, the tiny *Blastophaga grossorum*. The pregnant female forces herself through the apex of the fruit, often losing limbs in the process; she removes pollen from the female flowers as she lays her eggs there. The grubs hatch and feed inside the fruit, developing into adults. As the fruit matures the male wasps fertilise the females, and then help them out of the fig by cutting special holes. The female passes the male flowers on her way, dusting them with pollen and then repeats the process again as she enters the next fig. In the case of the common fig usually grown in gardens, the flowers are all female and need no pollination.

There are three other types: the “Caprifig” with male and female flowers, requiring visits by the gall wasp; the “Smyrna” fig (used to produce dried figs), needing cross-pollination by Caprifigs in order to develop normally; and the “San Pedro” fig which is intermediate. Its first crop is independent like the common fig, its second crop dependent on pollination.

Jacky Tyrwhitt, in her book *Making a Garden on a Greek Hillside*, mentions that one used to be able to buy ornoi in Greece during June. These are wild figs full of the pollinating wasps, and pairs of the fruit would be hung over the branches of the tree needing to be fertilized.

## Juicy fruits

The fig bears two crops, the first is called the “breba” crop; this ripens in early summer on last season’s growth. The second crop is borne in the autumn on the new growth, and is known as the main crop. The fruit must be allowed to ripen fully on the tree before they are picked, as they will not continue to ripen if picked when immature. A ripe fruit will be slightly soft and starting to bend at the neck; the skin often cracks on ripening, exposing the pulp beneath. There are now many cultivated varieties, and amongst the most popular are ‘Celeste’, ‘Brown Turkey’, ‘Brunswick’ and ‘Marseilles’.

## Slow growers

Figs are pretty drought tolerant once established, and can be seen sprouting from the most inhospitable crevices (rocks, walls). They can be grown in containers and make eye-catching specimens, however it is wise to choose a slow-growing cultivar for this. Bear in mind that the fallen fruits are messy however! It is a good idea to replace most of the potting soil every three years and keep the sides of the container shaded to prevent overheating in sunlight.

Figs do grow well and produce the highest quality fruit in Mediterranean climates – they

require sun for most of the day if the fruits are to be of their best. However, very hot, dry spells will cause fruit-drop even if the trees are irrigated. Conversely, if there is rain during fruit development and ripening, this may cause the fruit to split. With care, figs can grow in wetter, cooler areas, but need the shelter of a wall; they often grow as a multi-stemmed tree where they have to endure cold winters. If there are heavy rains and your tree is at risk of waterlogging, drainage ditches should be dug. They do have the ability to re-sprout from the base if they are killed off by a frost, but it is best to find out which cultivars do well locally before purchasing your tree.

Figs can be grown on a wide range of soils, providing there is sufficient depth and drainage, but highly acid soils are unsuitable. They are fairly tolerant of moderate salinity. Young fig trees should be watered regularly until fully established; mulch the soil around the trees to conserve moisture. Regular fertilizing is usually only necessary only for potted trees. Excessive nitrogen encourages leafy growth at the expense of fruit, and the fruit that is produced often does not ripen well, if at all.

### Fig farming

Fig trees can be raised from seed (even seed extracted from commercial dried fruits), however they are usually propagated by cuttings. Select 30cm long pieces of dormant wood, less than 3cm diameter, with two-year-old wood at base. One-year twigs with a heel of two-year branch at the base may also be used. Dip the cuttings in a rooting hormone and allow them to callus one week in a moist place at 10-15 degrees Celsius. Keep roots moist until planted. Never transplant or disturb the young tree while it is starting new growth in spring, as this will set it back and may even kill it.

Pruning is really only necessary during the formative years, and thereafter, figs are productive with or without heavy pruning. Repeated pruning to control the size can result in fewer fruits. Avoid heavy winter pruning, as the main crop is borne on the terminals of last year's wood. It is wise to prune immediately after the main crop is harvested.

NB: The latex or milky sap exuded by the tree may be irritating to the skin and should be removed quickly. Aristotle noted its use for coagulating milk to make cheese and it is still used thus today. The latex is also used medicinally, and is widely applied on warts, skin ulcers and sores.

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