

FIG MAN on campus * LSU releasing new fig varieties developed by horticulturist Ed O'Rourke**

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Thanks to former students, an 83-year-old horticulturist has gotten to see something not all plant breeders get to see - the completion of a new variety.

Retired LSU horticulturist Ed O'Rourke came to Baton Rouge after receiving his Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1954.

Professor Julian Miller, for whom the LSU AgCenter horticulture building on Highland Road is named, recruited O'Rourke, a New Orleans native who'd gotten his bachelor of science degree at old Southwestern Louisiana Institute in Lafayette.

"He wanted someone to do fruit breeding," O'Rourke said. "Apples, pears, figs - fruit trees that hadn't gotten much attention in Louisiana."

The upside of the proposition was Miller's reputation as a plantsman who could sustain financial support for his ideas. The downside was O'Rourke, in addition to teaching duties, was signing on to a project that might take his entire career. It did.

"I knew apple varieties could take 30 years," O'Rourke said. "I came to LSU as an associate professor with tenure. I knew I wasn't going to have a hell of a lot of publication early on."

In the early 1960s, O'Rourke's fig research orchard at Hill Farm on the LSU campus was bulldozed to make way for sorority houses. Some big trees, progeny of O'Rourke's early work, were lost in Plaquemines Parish during Hurricane Katrina.

A horticulturist named Ben Williams, a friend and former student of O'Rourke's, had taken cuttings from some of O'Rourke's trees and transplanted them at LSU's Hammond Research Station.

O'Rourke had put a few of his fig trees in the hands of nurserymen and county agents which gave two other former students, LSU horticulturists Jimmy Boudreaux and Charles Johnson, places to look for O'Rourke fig trees. Johnson planted the trees at the Burden Research Center in Baton Rouge.

LSU will release some new varieties of O'Rourke figs in the spring. One is called "The O'Rourke Fig." The others are "Champagne" and "Tiger."

O'Rourke's LSU Gold was released in 1995 and LSU Purple in 1990.

"It's gratifying," O'Rourke said. "I knew the trees were there. Figs are so easy to grow. They grow wherever sugar cane can grow."

Other than by LSU, there hasn't been a new fig variety released in 40 years, Johnson said.

O'Rourke and longtime friend and botanist Leon Standifer literally wrote the book on gardening in south Louisiana - "Gardening in the Humid South," LSU Press.

The section on figs begins: "Maybe you have to grow up in the South or in Mediterranean areas to like figs. The trees often get rather large in a small back yard, but they grow well throughout the Deep South and have only minor disease and pest problems (except for squirrels, birds and little boys)."

Highly prized as the chief ingredient in preserves, our grandparents and great-grandparents regarded figs as a sweet treat in the dead of winter, said horticulturist Charles Johnson who grew up in Choctaw County, Ala., north of Mobile.

Johnson got undergraduate and master's degrees in horticulture at Mississippi State University in Starkville. His Ph.D. is from LSU where he met O'Rourke in the late 1970s.

"My grandparents had a big fig tree that spread over creation," Johnson said. "As children, we stood under the tree."

Horticulturists who work with peaches, strawberries and blueberries refer to the fig as part of "miscellaneous crops," Johnson laughed.

"It's hard to put a farm gate value on figs," he said.

Figs may lack the commercial zing of peaches, but if you walk around any town in the South you'll see fig branches, heavy with fruit, hanging over backyard fences.

Three or four years ago, researchers found the notes of a scientist in Israel who'd found that fig sap, a milky substance Johnson calls latex, inhibited the growth of some cancer cells.

In the past, Johnson had supplied LSU medicinal plant researcher Zhijun Liu with barks, leaves and fruit for Liu's work.

Now, Johnson and anyone he can get to help him harvest green figs for the School of Natural and Renewable Resources researcher.

Some of O'Rourke's figs have figured in Liu's research, though another fig variety, Kadota, seems the best cancer cell growth inhibitor so far.

"It's made me rethink growing figs," Johnson said, "as green or ripe figs. You have to really twist the green figs' stems to pick them, and there are bristles on the leaves."

Of his work that has helped O'Rourke's fig trees find their way into people's yards, Johnson said, "We wanted Ed and the LSU AgCenter to get the proper credit. It's always good to finish a project."

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