

Ray's Figs Ray's Figs

The Sycomore Fig

[Daniel Yakir](#) is an Israeli fig enthusiast who also has fine photographic skills. One of his ambitions is to identify and photograph all of the figs grown in Israel. This summer he sent me a lot of text and photos of *Ficus sycomorus*, the Sycomore Fig of the Bible. So many people ask me questions about the sycomore fig that I decided to post this page for them. Don't ask me any questions about this fig. I've posted everything I know about it here. I do suggest that you set the display properties of your monitor to 1024 x 768 pixels for the best viewing experience of these photos.

The word sycomore is very ancient It was called *sycomuru* in Roman and Greek, *shikma* in Aramaic and Hebrew (The same word is used in Arabic in some Middle Eastern countries.), and *shikmin* in Syriac The origin of the Sycmore fig is Central Africa, south of Abyssinia (Habash).. The tree appeared about 5000 years ago in Egypt, probably from seeds imported with the fruit from the headwaters of the Nile. From there it came into Israel and Lebanon, but only in deep river valleys and on the coastal plain. The sycomore will not tolerate any frost. It is also found on some of the warmer islands of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, especially Cyprus. The tree is evergreen, defoliating only in --relatively speaking--cold winters.

The tree is beautiful with a wide strong stem that begins branching close to the ground. Height up to 15 meters; width up to 6 meters. There are 3 fruit generations: *profici*, *mamme*, and *mammoni* (the eaten fruit) The figs are red-rose when ripe. Cuttings are used to propagate new trees. In sandy soils near the sea the length of the cuttings are up to 1.5 meters long.



Amos 7: 14: *I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of Sycamore-fig trees*

. The prophet Amos occupied the most humble position in the society of his day. No one but the poorest cultivated sycamore figs for it was hard labor.

The Hebrew word *boles* occurs only once in the Bible and has been variously translated as 'gatherer' and 'piercer.' The Septuagint (the first translation of the Bible into Greek done about 200 BC for the Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt). translates *boles* *shikmim* (piercer of sycamore fruit) as *knizon sycamina* (piercer of sycamore fruit), not gatherer of sycamore fruit. The Egyptians pierced the fruit to hasten its ripening, thereby prevent the fig wasps in the fruit from maturing and spoiling it.

Theophrastus says that iron nails or prongs were employed to make incisions or scratches in the tree. However, there is solid evidence that it was the fruit itself which was scratched. The idea was that letting out some of the latex or sap would initiate ripening. In reality, the piercing or gashing causes the fruit to generate ethylene gas which induces ripening. Sycamore fruit culture could be modernized very readily by spraying the fruit with dilute solutions of phytohormones which also induce ethylene gas production. Labor costs would be slashed if this were done.

For a discussion of modern research on piercing or nipping the fruit, see J. Galil's article, [An Ancient Technique for Ripening Sycamore Fruit in East -Mediterranean Countries](#) in pdf format, readable with Adobe Acrobat.

Luke 19: 3: *He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a Sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way*

. Sycamore trees were planted on the sides of roads to provide shade and some were planted along the road that Jesus took.

The Ancients prized not only the fruit, but even more the fine wood. The Egyptians preferred sycamore wood for their coffins. This fine example of a Sycamore tree is



about 1000 years old. It was a stately tree of 100 years when the First Crusade reached the Holy Land and 300 years old when the Muslims expelled the last of the Crusaders from Acre.



Jumping to modern times, it was very common to see Sycamore trees planted near homes for their excellent shade as late as the 1940s, chickens eating fallen fruits that were not picked by the owner. The fruits of the Sycamore tree were only second best comparing to the figs. Even so there are evidence that Sycamore fruits were sold at a price almost identical to that of Carica figs in the markets of the Middle East . Sycamore figs are planted today along the roads and can be seen along the avenues in Tel Aviv, Herzelia, Ashdod and in many other cities and towns.



The fruit of *Fcus sycomorus* vary large (25-50 mm in diameter) to medium or even small, and are it is yellow to red when ripe. It is borne in large bunches on the main trunk and branches. Its bark and milky latex are used in folk medicine against ringworm and other skin disorders. The name *sycomorus* comes from the Greek *sycomoros*, which means "fig-mulberry.". As you have already seen this tree makes a superior specimen for large gardens in warm, frost-free areas.

Danny describes its fruit as "not very sweet bur extremely aromatic. They can compete 100% with figs!"



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