

DISCOVER FIGS

By Wallace P. Howell
WSU Benton-Franklin Master Gardener

When I was growing up, in Troutdale, Oregon, my mother had an unidentified variety of fig tree which produced medium-sized purple fruits. She ate the figs with undisguised relish, but I thought they were a bit insipid and not at all tasty. However, I admired the tree for its hardiness, since several times, while I was growing up, it froze to the ground and recovered. Within two or three years, it had again become a small shrub and was bearing fruit. The mature size of the tree was about eight feet and would bear two or three gallons of fruit per season.

Winter Hardiness

In recent years, I have discovered more varieties of figs, including several that I consider quite tasty. I have added two of those varieties to my home garden. I have also gained considerable respect for the versatility of figs, as potted plants, shrubs, and for espalier plantings. I have also learned that a modest amount of winter protection is usually adequate to prevent severe winter dieback of small trees and shrub-sized plants. Where adequate outdoor winter protection is just not available, the plants can be maintained in sheltered patio planters or pots as small as 8 or 10 inches in diameter.

Adequate winter protection can usually be provided by planting adjacent to the sunny side of a heated building, within 2 or 3 feet of the wall.

Origin

The origin of the fig is just a bit hazy. It is mentioned in the Bible in various contexts. Searches for the origin frequently turn up references to the ancient city of Smyrna, currently located in Turkey, on the waterway known as the Dardanelles. Smyrna is called by the modern Turkish name of "Izmir". It seems appropriate to give the origin as "The Mid East".

Propagation

The usual method of starting a new plant is through

the use of cuttings if they are available from a desired plant. If not, starter plants are available from many nurseries. If a specific variety is desired, the latter choice would be best. If a start from a friend's shrub or tree is all that is wanted, a two or three-year old shoot will do. Avoid thick, pithy cuttings. Select a cutting 8 or 10 inches long. Make the base cut cleanly and squarely across just beneath a node, or joint. Cut the top at about 45 degrees just above a node. It is desirable to remove all side buds from the lower part of the cutting to avoid later unwanted sprouts.

Cuttings may be taken whenever the plant is dormant. Figs will thrive in most soils, from heavy clays to light sandy loams. However they do not like either extremely alkaline soils or bogs. They do prefer regular watering and good drainage and thrive on drip irrigation.

Varieties

Fig varieties widely recommended for home gardens are: 'Brown Turkey', 'Celeste', 'Adriatic', 'Beall', 'Kadota', 'Conadria', 'Desert King', 'Granata', 'Latterula', 'Mission', 'Negronne', 'Neveralla' a.k.a. 'Lion Fig of Syria', and 'Violetta du Bordeaux'. Of this group, the first two are considered the hardest. Home garden fig trees do not require pollination, and most varieties will bear two crops a year. The first crop comes in June or July on last year's wood. The second, and bigger crop, comes in late summer to fall from the current summer's wood.

The fig varieties currently in my garden (Latterula and Violetta du Bordeaux) were both taken as cuttings from friends' trees, and were chosen mainly for flavor and immediate availability.

Variety Characteristics

'Brown Turkey': a.k.a. 'San Piero' and 'Black Spanish'; brownish-purple fruit; small tree

'Adriatic': large green to yellowish fruit with red pulp;

very good dried

'Beall': excellent fruit quality

'Kadota': excellent, both fresh and dried; greenish-yellow skin

'Celeste': a.k.a. 'Blue Celeste'; bronzy-tinged violet fruit; rosy amber pulp; dries well

'Conadria': white skin, blushed violet; white to red pulp

'Desert King': green skin, white-flecked; violet-pink pulp

'Granata': a.k.a. 'Persian Fig'; large, blue-black fruits; pink pulp

'Latterula', a.k.a. 'White Italian Honey Fig'; large greenish-yellow fruits; honey-colored pulp

'Mission': a.k.a. 'Black Mission'; purple-black skin; large tree

'Neveralla': a.k.a. 'Lion Fig of Syria'; many sweet, dark-colored fruits; ripens September to mid-November in the northwest

'Negronne': many small, jet-black fruits; red pulp; two crops; especially ornamental in the northwest

'Violetta du Bordeaux': good crop of plump, medium-purple fruits; red, very sweet pulp

A word to the wise: It is advisable to keep fallen fruit, especially ripe fruit, off decks, sidewalks, and other walkways. Figs become very sticky and difficult to remove (even more so than other soft fruits), especially when stepped on.