

Ficus carica

[Synonyms : *Ficus caricea*]

FIG is a deciduous or evergreen shrub or tree. Probably native to south-western Asia it has greenish-yellow to purple fruit (receptacles).

It is also known as *Anjeer* (Hindi, Persian), *Anjir* (Malay, Urdu), *Bebereira* (Portuguese), Brown turkey fig, *Carique* (French), Common fig tree, Cultivated fig, *Echter Feigenbaum* (German), Edible fig, *Feige* (German), *Feigenbaum* (German), *Ffigyswydden* (Welsh), *Fico* (Italian), *Fidgi* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Figen* (Danish), Fig tree, *Figue* (French), *Figueira* (Portuguese), *Figuier* (French), *Figuier domestique* (French), *Fikon* (Swedish), *Fikonträd* (Swedish), *Fikos* (Greek), *Fikovnik obyčajný* (Slovak), *Fikovnik smokvoň* (Czech), *Higa* (Spanish), *Higo* (Spanish), *Injir* (Turkish), *Karikfikuso* (Esperanto), *Mo fa go* (Chinese), *Sigra tat-tin* (Maltese), *Sika* (Greek), *Smochin* (Rumanian), *Teen* (Arabic), and *Viikuna* (Finnish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of argument (fruit), 'I keep my secret', and prolific (tree). Apparently cultivated fig trees have only female flowers and they rely on the pollinating insect to lay its eggs after flying from wild male figs to accelerate the ripening of the fruit.

Warning – half ripe fruit are viewed as poisonous. Handling the plant can cause photosensitive skin and dermatitis in subsequent sunlight.

There are three types of fig, white (including green), purple and red, for each of which there are then many varieties. The fig is one of the three sweetest fruit known, the other two being the grape (*Vitis vinifera*) and the cherry (*Prunus avium*).

Carica is derived from Caria (Asia Minor), the place from which for both Greeks and Romans the best fruit were supposed to come.

Figs were part of man's diet when he was still a hunter, gatherer and fisher, but the fruit are believed to have been actively cultivated only from approximately 4000-3000 BC.

In many cultures the fig has common symbolic features apart from practical considerations.

The fruit are closely associated with fertility, the seeds provide a symbol of unity and true understanding and the white sap in the stem or fruit has been suggestive of a universal masculine and feminine energy. North Africans usually recognize the fig as a symbol of fertility.

It also attracts some superstitious practices. The Berbers, despite admonishment from orthodox Muslims, still leave fig offerings on rocks during the ploughing season.

For some authorities it was under a fig tree (others have said a banyan tree, *Ficus benghalensis* or a peepul tree, *Ficus religiosa*) that the monk, Gautama, received a divine revelation and blossomed into the Buddha. Thus the tree is revered as sacred today in India, China and Japan. For Moslems also the fig is important. They call it 'the Tree of Heaven' which is revered because Muhammad (c.570-c.632) swore by it.

Sumerian records dating from about 2750 BC show that it was used medicinally then as the dried fruit appear as an ingredient in a prescription for a poultice. A scene depicting fig harvesting was discovered on the wall of an Egyptian tomb dating back to about 1900-1700 BC which indicates its importance to the ancient Egyptians. It was eaten by Egyptian priests at the moment of their formal consecration and baskets of figs were found placed in the tombs, not only as sustenance during the journey on which the dead

were about to embark but also for the fruit's medicinal (laxative) properties upon which the Egyptians appear to have set great store. The Old Testament of the *Bible* also bears witness to the stature of the fig for ancient Hebrews.

Authorities claim that the Persian king, Xerxes I who ruled from 486-465 BC, had a particular penchant for fresh figs. It is alleged that his disappointment at losing the sea battle in the Salamis Straits in 480 BC arose primarily from his failure to conquer a land that cultivated this fruit.

The tree was sacred for the Greeks and also for the Romans. They both believed that it was a gift to the people from Dionysus (the Greek god of wine and agriculture) and Bacchus, his Roman counterpart, as well as being valued by them as an important source of food. So much so in fact that the Greeks included the fruit with the phallus as a fertility symbol at festivals of Dionysus – a sexual symbolism which survives in some of today's coarser gestures and expressions. [Some authorities attribute the first documentation of fig culture to the satirical, Greek lyric poet, Archilochus of Paros (c.714-676 BC).] For the Romans the fig tree had added divinity because according to legend the wolf that suckled Romulus and Remus had rested under the tree and in recognition of this grace figs were given during the Roman celebrations marking the first day of a new year.

The fig was one of the principal foods for the ancient Greeks and of such importance that it was forbidden by law to export any of the best fruit. Athletes were convinced that figs could bestow swiftness and strength and ate them in quantities, and the Spartans provided them at their public table. The Greeks, then the Romans and later still the southern Gauls (who lived in France), all fattened what were initially sacrificial geese (and dormice) on these fruit. This process causes the grossly enlarged liver referred to widely beyond French shores as *foie gras*. During early centuries in the Mediterranean however there were some areas where the fig was considered to be 'poor man's food', and they were fed to livestock as a whole not just the sacrificial geese.

The fig was introduced to Rome early on and was welcomed there enthusiastically. Some authorities suggest that one of the driving forces that encouraged Rome to embark upon the Third Punic War (149-146 BC) was the desire to control the cultivation of fig trees on the African coast (surely shades of Xerxes I three hundred odd years earlier). By the time Gaius Plinius Secundus, otherwise Pliny (23-79) the respected natural historian who wrote *Historia Naturalis*, was alive at least 29 varieties of fig already existed. The fig is depicted in murals in Pompeii, the Roman city that was rocked by the eruption of Mount Etna in 79 AD before being enveloped by volcanic dust and lava.

The Romans introduced the fig elsewhere in Europe. In the 9th Century Charlemagne (747-814), who was king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the West, encouraged the tree's cultivation in central Europe. But some authorities have suggested that its 'foreign' origins, combined with climatic conditions, may well have helped to retard its widespread introduction on the Continent. However as a Bishop John writes in a 16th Century manuscript, found in the Dominican monastery of St. Paul in Leipzig, after conversing with a monk who had returned from the Holy Lands

the Arabs and infidels eat them on fast days – but this is no reason for a pious Christian soul to take fright at them.

Reputedly the fruit became a favourite of Bishop John's and were prepared for him by roasting them with sweet wine and raisins and thickening this compôte with rice flour.

One particularly sad association with the fruit involves the Guanches who once inhabited the largest island in the Canaries, Gran Canaria, and were wiped out after Spanish conquests at the end of the 15th Century. It seems that their demise was preceded by a previous disaster. Much earlier in that Century it is thought that Majorcans (now Mallorcans) introduced a variety of fig to the insular community. The plant not only established itself

quickly but appealed to the Guanches so much that it rapidly became one of the island's staple foods. A major population explosion is said to have occurred at about the same time. Although this may have been co-incidental, authorities suggest that the fruit made such a significant improvement in the food supply that it could have been a significant contributory factor. But the extra mouths could not be filled from the Island's finite resources (even with the introduced fig) and the Guanches are believed to have killed their newborn babies (some say only the girls) unless they were the firstborn, in order to prevent or contain famine and save the population. By the time the Spaniards arrived therefore the community had already experienced desolation. This was further exacerbated as those remaining died directly at the hands of the invaders or from an epidemic of an imported disease or were sold into slavery – all of which led to the community's extinction.

Some authorities believe that the fig tree had reached England by at least the 16th Century. Certainly since then, particularly in recent centuries, it appears to have attracted various local traditions and legends (the latter of often doubtful longevity). Some areas in England rechristened Palm Sunday 'Fig Sunday', a day on which figs were part of the menu. (It was said that Jesus, when hungry on Palm Sunday morning had been faced with a fruitless fig tree.) Then in Watford it was alleged that a fig tree could (or can) be seen growing in a churchyard out of the unnamed grave of a well-known local atheist. Legend there is supposed to tell how the farmer or lady in question (who rejected overtures when alive to conversion to Christianity) requested burial with a fig in hand and contended that the tree would sprout if there was a life after death. But perhaps the most fascinating legend is one that for some authorities is spurious. It is woven around a Cornish saint – St. Newlyn. A fig tree grows on the wall of the church dedicated to her – a wall which is believed to have been built in the 14th Century – and the fig tree's roots are supposed to have sprung from the point where the sainted princess placed her staff and declared that a church should be built. As further embellishment some local people have also claimed that any person who removes any part of the tree could suffer disaster and death. The primary doubts about these latter stories hinge on when the fig first appeared in the British Islands.

This species of fig was introduced to southern North America and has been cultivated in California in the United States for just over 200 years. It was grown at the Santa Clara Mission where it was introduced in 1792. The Havasupai North American Indian tribe in Arizona not only ate the fresh fruit but also preserved them for food in Winter. (Authorities note that the fruit were often sun-dried and stored in sacks, and the fallen fruit were ground to a thick paste with water – this being dried in sheets for later use.) The Havasupai also used the plant to make a drink.

In art the fig appears in various forms. In classical Christian paintings the fig leaf was used as a modesty covering, while in other paintings the fruit can sometimes be seen as a sexual symbol or a sign of plenty.

Figs have not been overlooked in literature either. The English playwright, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) makes much use of it, with varying degrees of bawdy allusion. A succinct example is provided by Iago in *Othello* when talking to Roderigo about Desdemona.

Blessed fig's end! the wine she drinks is made of grapes; if she had been blessed, she would never have loved the Moor;

Awareness of the fig's sexual connotations is not confined to the Mediterranean or European regions. In Kyoto, Japan, it used to be traditional to purchase the ripe candied fruit fashioned into the shape of a human phallus at the Shinto Shrine's Autumn festivals.

Fermented figs are made into alcohol (both wine and brandy) and in some of the poorer parts of south-eastern Europe inferior figs, mashed, have served as a bread substitute. The fruit, roasted and ground, make a luxurious coffee and this is often added to Bavarian and Austrian coffees today. Still in some parts of Europe the latex (extracted from the leaves) is brushed over fresh meat to help its maturation – a latex that was used in ancient civilizations to curdle milk.

The soft fig wood has also had its uses. Apparently Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC), the Greek philosopher, indicated that in his time it could be chosen for fashioning hoops, garlands and ornaments, and for theatre seating.

Today the roasted fruit are used as a commercial ingredient in bakery products, and as flavouring in some coffees. The fruit are also used by the drinks industry for alcohol eg. wine, brandy, and by the pharmaceutical industry in proprietary medicines eg. laxatives such as Syrup of figs.

Authorities relate how fig ointments are used today by pregnant African women to encourage their milk and they are also believed to use them as a sterility preventative.

Medicinally, the fruit has been employed in folk medicine for thousands of years, especially in its native lands. It is still used today as a treatment for boils and ulcers, and the milky juice from the stem and the fresh green fruit can still be used to remove warts. Similarly the fruit continues to provide a remedy for constipation. The fig has long been recognized for medicinal use in the British Pharmacopoeia as in those of many other countries.