



Urban Harvest

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## Figs Are a Summer Treat

Bob Randall

The fig is a delicious fruit that is extraordinarily easy to grow in our yards. Because it is fairly attractive, it works well in the front or backyard landscape. Fresh figs are extraordinarily difficult to store or ship, as they are so delicate. Accordingly, homegrown fruit is much higher quality than in the stores, where it costs a fortune and quickly spoils. Thus you need to grow figs or you will miss one of Gulf Coast life's summer pleasures.

Just three figs contain 25% of the daily-recommended allowance of weight-reducing and cancer-preventing fiber. Figs are also high in several minerals. A serving of three figs contain useful amounts of potassium, calcium, magnesium, and iron.

They are productive, tasty, take no care, and are long lived. They are easy to plant, need moderate drainage and after the first year rarely need watering. This is especially true if they are mulched well with leaves or pulled weeds. South of FM 1960, most kinds are completely freeze-hardy here. North of that, all kinds are hardy in most years, and some kinds are freeze hardy in all years. Even if frozen back, they recover quickly from their roots and are certain to live a very long life.

Figs also have no significant pests (other than birds) and figs need no pruning, unless they are spreading too much or are in the way. After the first three years or so after planting your tree, figs produce a large crop every year.

### Fig Tree Varieties

The late J. Stewart Nagle did research to show that fig trees being marketed in the Greater Houston area are often mislabeled, so no two "**Celeste**" figs purchased around town are necessarily the same ones. The only sure way to get a good fig is to buy one from a nursery that is known to have a good one, or to grow one's own cuttings from a good tree.

Figs differ in color of skin and flesh, in size, in sweetness and quality of aftertaste, in frost resistance, in month of bearing, in productivity month by month, and many botanical characteristics such as the shape of the leaf indentation at the stem, and the shape of the fruit.

Skin colors include red-purple, bronze, yellow and green, with intermediates as well. Main flesh colors include white/cream, amber/honey, and strawberry/rose.

It is possible to have figs over many months. Most figs bear here in late June/early July or in August, but a few ripen later. I have picked fair tasting figs both in November and in February.

Dr. Nagle did a meticulous botanical study of more than 40 varieties of fig scattered at sites from Magnolia to Pearland. There are many excellent ones. He, George McAfee and others have tried to compare the overall quality of these many fruits.

I have not tried growing several acclaimed varieties, including one of Nagle's favorites **Galbun**, and a couple other late ones like **Trojano** and **Genoa White**. And I haven't tried several of McAfee's favorites: **Royal Vineyard, BA-1, Deanna, Mission, Green Ischia, and Hardy Chicago**. But I have tried quite a few. My top rated early fig is a greenish yellow fig with honey amber interior named **Banana**. My favorite late season fig is a green skinned "mystery" fig with strawberry flesh that Dr. Nagle found in a wrong orchard row and called **Mys-steak**, but I prefer to call Nagle. Below these two, I would rank **Celeste** (Sugar Fig), **LSU Purple**, and **Celeste Malta**. You can buy several of these at fruit tree sales every winter.

### Care of Fig Trees

Figs will produce much faster if they are watered and fertilized heavily until May of the first year and watered heavily all summer. Probably no fruit responds better to heavy mulch, and figs may even require it. Several inches of leaves every fall help a lot. After the tree is of adequate size, it rarely needs fertilizer.

Unless the fig gets too tall to pick, or has broken or dead branches, there is no need to prune. However, in time, root suckers will come up and create a very wide plant with many trunks that cannot be mowed around. This can lead to weed trees growing between the trunks. Soon it will be difficult to pick the figs, and the figs will be less plentiful. Thus, keep the weeds down and keep the number of fig trunks to a handful at most.

Birds love figs. If you grow lots of figs, you can more easily share some with the birds. By getting to the fig tree early in the day, you can beat the birds. Or if you have a few prized ones (like the large yellow green banana figs), buy both some fiberglass window screening at a home improvement store and some wooden clothespins. Cut the screening into approximately 6 by 24 inch pieces and fold the 24 inches in half and then in half again. Then staple the sides of the screening so as to make a 6 x 6 pocket 2 layers thick open at one end. Put this over the fig before it turns and birds get it. Yum!

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