

Growing figs fine in Delaware

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If I can grow delicious figs in our yard in Dover, then probably anyone can.

I grew up in a New York City apartment, with gardening limited to our windowsills where we had some rather spindly geraniums, snake plants, a grapefruit grown from a seed, and an occasional sunflower.

If you're wondering how anyone like that can become a botanist, the answer probably lies in the nearby 200-acre park where my sisters and I spent our summers picking blackberries and raspberries, finding old oyster shells in the Indian caves, climbing trees and redirecting streams. In case this semi-wild forest doesn't sound like the Big Apple, this is Inwood Hill Park, overlooking the Hudson River at the very north end of Manhattan.

Getting back to figs, this is the third year in a row that our fig tree has produced an abundance of delicious figs. The inside of our figs are pinkish, sweet and juicy, and contain tiny soft seeds. You may have had figs in fig newtons, and whole dried figs are available in most supermarkets, but there is nothing like a fresh fig.

I planted our Brown Turkey fig, a variety of the common fig (*Ficus carica*), about eight years ago, and for the first five years all the above-ground parts died back each winter. Each spring, an increasing number of new shoots came up, but, as I learned, these first-year shoots do not bear figs.

Then, unexpectedly, one winter was mild enough for all the above-ground branches to live, and many figs appeared! These figs remained green and hard for what seemed like ages; then, a few at a time, they ripened, turning reddish-brown on the outside and soft and sweet inside.

I've now pruned the multiple trunks back to just three strong ones about seven feet tall. Last winter, remembering the oddly-shaped tar paper-wrapped fig trees that I used to see in front of some of the Italian families' houses in the Bronx, I took the

Garden Tales



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An edible fig (*Ficus carica*) grows in Dover.

precaution of piling dead leaves around the plant inside plastic mesh, to protect it from the cold.

I don't know whether that was necessary, but this was another great fig year. The other problem we had, besides the cold, was the ants that discovered the figs last year. Luckily, this year was good — no ants! I don't know whether it worked, but I put some Vaseline on the trunks to entangle any ants that attempted to ascend the trunk in search of these treasures.

Our familiar edible figs, such as Mission, Kadota, Calimyrna and Brown Turkey, are all different varieties of the fig, *Ficus carica*, in the mulberry family. The fruit is an oddity, called a syconium, which is a type of multiple fruit, formed from many tiny flowers inverted inside a receptacle. Think of it as an inside-out mulberry.

The Brown Turkey fig that I grow is a variety that can produce fruits without pollinators. However, some other fig varieties are well-known for elaborate pollination systems that involve tiny wasps. When one of these varieties, the Smyrna fig, was

first introduced to the U.S., no fruits were produced until someone also imported the wasps to pollinate the flowers, along with the male pollen-producing trees called "caprifigs".

Figs are native to the Mediterranean region and often regarded as hardy to zones 8 or 9. Some varieties, like Brown Turkey, can be grown farther north, even to zone 5 with good winter protection.

Other well-known species related to the common fig, but not used for edible fruits, include the houseplants weeping fig (*Ficus benjamina*) and rubber plant (*Ficus elastica*), the sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa*), tropical strangler figs (several species), and of course there is the fig leaf of Adam and Eve.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.

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