**TEXAS HIGHWAYS--FRUIT SIDEBAR/FIGS--MALLORY**

# FALLING FOR FIGS

One nostalgic fruit--which most old-timers recall fondly, but which most people regard only as filling for a soft cookie--may be making a comeback.

"We see an increasing interest in figs," says Dan Copeland, horticulturist at King's Orchard, a pick-your-own farm at Plantersville. "We already have 1,400 fig plants and will add 500 more each year because there's such demand. When most people lived on farms, everybody had access to good, fresh figs, but now they don't. In some supermarkets you can find them shipped in from other places, but they can't compare with the taste of locally-grown, because figs are best when fully ripened on the tree."

Biologically, the nitty-gritty on this member of the mulberry family turns common notions of "fruit" inside out…literally.

Cut open most fruits, and you find seeds inside a succulent, protective covering (actually matured ovary tissue). Cut open a ripe fig, on the other hand, and you find the remains of unpollinated male and female flowers. Botanically called a syconium, the fig is actually an inverted flower enclosed in stem tissue from which the fruit is produced parthenocarpically (without pollination). [7.]

"Figs were common dooryard trees for early settlers," says freelance historian Martha Doty Freeman of Austin, "but commercial growing began around the turn of the century as part of broad agricultural development in Texas encouraged in large part by railroad companies and other land promoters."

The 1910 census report showed Texas with one million fig trees, a figure which soared ten-fold by 1930--with most orchards located between Houston and Galveston. [5.]

Convinced to the core that figs would prove profitable, investors of the Galveston-Houston Interurban Land Company purchased 7,000 acres of prime land near Friendswood (along the Interurban rail line) for growing figs and oranges. Company literature promised that orchards would make growers financially independent in a few years. Some large-scale fig growers did, indeed, prosper as canning facilities sprang up to satisfy the collective palate of rapidly growing southeast Texas cities. [4.] Some farmers abandoned their orchards after a devastating freeze in 1912. [3.] Yet, as late at the mid-1960s, production from some 2,800 Gulf Coast farms totaled more than a million pounds of figs. [5.]

Magnolia proved the most popular fig variety for commercial canning. Once called Brunswick, the fig took on a new name around the turn of the century, says Dr. Ben Story, long-time professor of horticulture at Texas A&M University. "Throughout the South traveling drummers [salesmen] sold small magnolia trees farm to farm. When they ran out of magnolias, they'd sometimes substitute figs, which look the same when dormant. Farmers thought they were getting one thing but got another, which they called Magnolia figs."

King's Orchard relies on the time-tested Brown Turkey variety, in part because of its long producing season. Like most figs, it's susceptible to freezing, though most dormant fig trees can withstand temperatures as low as 10 degrees Fahrenheit. "We don't really mind if our plants freeze to the ground in the winter," Dan Copeland explains. "They'll come back and produce nicely the next summer, and they'll stay short like bushes for easy picking."

Freezing weather hasn't hurt old fig trees on a family farm nurtured by Clifton Sturm of Spring. "I thought the trees were lost, but the next year's

harvest was better than ever." Clifton has been making fig preserves for years. "Once they're ready, I wait a while before eating them," he says. "Oh, about 30 seconds--just long enough so I don't burn my mouth."

**--Randy Mallory**

--00--

**RESOURCES**


1. Dan Copeland (horticulturist), King's Orchard
2. Martha Doty Freeman, freelance historian
3. "Archeological Reconnaissance in the Second Reach of the Clear Creek Flood Control Project," p. 12, Prewitt & Associates, 1990 (via Freeman, above)
4. "Archeological Reconnaissance in the Third Reach of the Clear Creek Flood Control Project," Prewitt & Associates, 1990 (via Freeman, above)
5. *New Handbook of Texas* , Vol. 3, p. 19
6. Dr. Ben Story, TAMU prof. of horticulture
7. Tx. Dept. of Ag. website: http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/extension/homefruit/fig/fig.html