Eagle Article Sept ’16 Figs

Take my fig tree, please

By Anna Haller, local writer

One of my fig trees just won’t die. I prune it almost to the ground each winter and it returns in the spring mightier than ever. I’d need a backhoe to extract its roots, so I just let it live on from year to year.

Sylvia Plath said she saw her life branching out before her like a fig tree. Hers would be⎯and was⎯a mixed and tangled life, just like my fig tree, with its twisted limbs straight out of the Old Testament.

I don’t actually despise my fig tree. It’s just that it’s beside my patio and I’d really prefer planting something more orderly there. Patios should be neat as a button. Of course, I’m not the only one with fig tree issues. In fact, I’m in good company. The Good Lord gave a wayside fig tree a piece of His mind when He couldn’t find any figs on it, and the very next day Peter reported that the tree had withered and died (Mark 11:12-14).

In its favor, mine does produce a lot of fruit, but I can’t get anyone to eat them. Maybe I need better recipes, or maybe my fig tree is the wrong type. I feel guilty throwing the fruit away, but neither the dogs, nor the varmints are interested. The birds just peck at them.

Figs are a species of the mulberry family native to the Middle East and now occurring all around the Mediterranean. The edible fig was first cultivated 12,000 years ago in Gigala, a village in the Jordan Valley. This predates the domestication of wheat, barley and legumes and may be the first known instance of agriculture. The Latin for fig is ficus. Remember when well-equipped homes and offices used to have live ficus trees and we had to mist them daily?

After 600 B.C. figs rapidly spread all over the ancient world. The Greeks so improved the fruit, known by its brand name Attic, that it was marketed throughout the Middle East. Laws were promulgated to regulate Attic fig exports. On the Greek home front figs became a major table item. So maybe I’ve just got a second-rate species on my patio. On the other hand, Pliny writes that during harvest figs were generously fed to the slaves. I don’t think they’d have given their best produce to the slaves, so maybe mine are just the plain vanilla variety and I shouldn’t expect anything great. The Romans had an even nastier use for figs: they stuffed them down the throats of geese to make foie gras.

Fig leaves were the original Victoria’s Secret garment. We all can recall fig trees in the backgrounds of paintings of the Garden of Eden, and, in the foreground Adam and Eve with loins mysteriously covered somehow with fig leaves. Well, fig leaves are big enough for the job. Anthony Weiner⎯are you listening?

In one of the hadiths, Mohammed was said to have exclaimed: “If I should wish a fruit brought to Paradise, it would certainly be the fig.” Meanwhile, on the Nile, it was a basket of figs that harbored the asp that did Cleopatra in. And Gautama Buddha achieved enlightenment while sitting under a fig tree. If that’s what it takes to be enlightened I’ll try it in December once the mosquito threat subsides. But still, getting back to my fig-tree issue, I think any fig tree that ever existed was better than mine. When you read the ancients they make it sound like their sumptuous feasts were built around figs.

The popular admonition, “I don’t give a fig,” may have originated in Hamlet. Shakespeare had it as a play on a saucy gesture known as the “Spanish fig.” This gesture is made by thrusting the thumb between first and second fingers and waving the fist to show displeasure. The bard referenced this gesture once again in Henry IV: “Fig me like the bragging Spaniard.” The physical gesture inspiring the Shakespearean phrase can also possess smutty implications. It is very Mediterranean and was sometimes seen on “The Sopranos.”

The Spanish missionaries took figs to California. After the gold rush, nurserymen brought many other varieties to California from France and England. (Interestingly, at the time England was briefly warm enough to grow figs.) Several California fig orchards sought a better-tasting fig and brought in the Smyrna fig from Turkey. Alas, this variety needed a rare kind of wasp for pollination. Eventually the proper kind of fig wasp was introduced, and the Smyrna flourished.

The fig flower is actually inside the thing we regard as the fruit. Botanists call this

infructescense, which if you know any Latin isn’t all that astute. (It’s having to memorize all those damn made-up names that makes Botany so hard.) Anyway, there’s a small hole on the middle section of this ‘fruit’ through which the fig wasp gets inside to pollinate. Our local figs are self-pollinating and the wasps are out of work here. For figs that need wasps, where none are to be had, farmers will push a thin twig into the orifice and as they pull it out the male flowers rub against the females and natures work is done.

Figs grow in climates with hot summers as far north as Hungary and Moravia. Thousands of cultivars have been developed as human migration has brought the fig to many areas beyond its natural range. With all this going on, I ask you, why did I end up with such a disappointing variety of fig tree? After all, there are basically only three types of edible figs: (1) Common figs that have all female flowers and need no crosspollination for fruiting, the most popular cultivars of which are Kadoka, Black mission, Brown Turkey and Celeste; (2) Smyrna figs which require cross pollination by the trusty fig wasp carting pollen from wild figs for the fruit to mature; and (3) San Pedro figs which set an unpollinated early crop but need a pollinator for the later main crop.

Figs are not particular about soil here but do like a sunny, dry site, with good drainage. They are best planted in a protected site against a wall or fence, facing south to prevent a freeze back to the ground during a particular hard freeze. Dwarf fig shrubs can be container grown and some trees can be trained as an espalier. Regular fig trees have quite shallow, very long ranging root system and need space to spread. Here in Oxford they can grow very quickly and need to pruned by at least a third to one half its size in late winter or early spring. Excessive growth should be restrained by cutting back in order to set fruit. The fruit will take a hot, dry summer to ripen. Most fig trees sold in Oxford are self-pollinating.

Did you spot the variety with the most unlikely name? That, as it turns out is the one I have. It’s the Brown Turkey fig tree. This year it produced an abundant crop. This has been my best year for figs ever. Yet they have hardly any flavor.

Here’s where I end up: My Brown Turkey fig comes is subtle regional strains. According to an Internet fig forum (yes, there is such a thing) the consensus is that the California variety is insipid, while the southeast strain is fairly good. I think my supplier sent me the California version. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.

In any case my husband likes it and wants to keep it. He likes its gnarled, errant look. He’s creepy when it comes to gardens. He once called Felder Fushing’s radio show to ask how to grow privets.

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