



Louisiana Figs

The fig was one of the first fruits cultivated by ancient peoples. It is a native of Asia Minor, and when taken to Greece and other Mediterranean countries, became so widely used fresh and dried that it was known as the “poor man’s food.” The fig tree was imported to the United States sometime during the 16th century, and it grows well in the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast areas and in parts of California. Figs are one of the most popular fruits grown in Southern backyards.

Fruits of fig trees are hollow with the flowers located inside. The eye, or ostiole, is a small opening located at the end of the fig that enables the fig wasp to enter the fig fruit for pollination. The fig wasp does not exist in Louisiana; therefore, fruit is only produced by varieties that do not require pollination. Since the opening is not needed for the fig wasp, it has been possible to select for figs that have closed or plugged eye.

A closed eye on the fruit is an important characteristic for the humid South. Figs with open eyes often sour during rainy weather. Some varieties with open eyes, however, are grown in the South and harvested before full maturity for use in making preserves. Cold hardiness of trees is also a valuable trait, especially in North Louisiana.

Varieties

Celeste — The popular Celeste is a hardy fig variety that grows well throughout the state. The fruit is small to medium and is purplish-bronze to light brown with a light strawberry-colored pulp. The fruit has a closed eye and ripens in late June and July. Celeste is excellent for eating fresh, canning and preserving.

Southeastern Brown Turkey — Also known as Texas Everbearing, is a larger fig than Celeste. It has a copper or bronze skin and an amber pulp. A small breba crop of large figs usually ripens about two weeks before Celeste, followed by the main crop of medium-size figs two to three weeks after Celeste. The small eye has a reddish color from a very early stage. The fruit is good fresh and is excellent for processing.

Hunt — A bronze-to-brown pear-shaped fruit with a short neck and a long slender stalk, which allows the fruit to droop. The fruit is larger than Celeste with amber to pink pulp and few seeds. The fruit has a closed eye and begins to ripen about 10 days later than Celeste. Although Hunt continues to produce fruit about two weeks longer than Celeste, it is not a heavy bearer. It is,

however, well-adapted to the rainier areas of Louisiana. The fresh fruit quality is similar to that of Celeste.

Kadota — Sometimes known as Florentine, is a medium to large yellow fig that ripens at the same time as Hunt. The fruit has an open eye that is sealed with a honeylike substance. During rainy weather, the fruits split and may sour before becoming ripe enough to eat. Kadota is fair for eating fresh, but excellent for canning and preserves.

LSU Purple — A medium-size, long, turbinate, glossy reddish to dark purple fig that has light amber to light strawberry-colored pulp and a closed eye. A heavy main crop is produced in July followed by a later crop that often lasts into December. The mild flavor is good, and the fruit has high sugar content.

LSU Gold — A large yellow fig with light red to pink pulp. Because the fruit has an open eye when mature, it should be picked as soon as it reaches maturity because fruit spoilage may occur during ripening in high moisture periods. LSU Gold has good quality for eating fresh and preserving.

Alma — A medium to large pear-shaped to round fig with a light tan to brown skin and a light tan pulp. The eye is medium and self-sealing with drops of gum. The tree is highly productive with fruit ripening from late July through August. The fruit has few seed hulls and is very sweet.

Hardy Chicago — A small- to medium-size fruit with blackish purple skin and a strawberry-colored pulp. The fruit is firm and holds up well during handling, processing and rainy weather. The fruit has a small eye and ripens five to seven days after Celeste.

O’Rourke — A new LSU fig, is sometimes known as Improved Celeste. It is medium-size, tan to brown, has a tan pulp and tapers slightly toward the stem end with a long neck. The eye is partially closed. The fruit ripens five to seven days before Celeste and continues over a 15-day period.

Champagne — A new LSU fig, is sometimes known as Golden Celeste. The medium-size fruit has a yellow skin, a tan to caramel-colored pulp and a partially closed eye. The fruit ripens about the same time as Celeste.

Tiger — A new LSU fig, is sometimes known as Giant Celeste. It has a large brown fruit, yellow to gold pulp and a partially closed eye. Fruit ripens five to seven days after Celeste and continues over a 15-day period.

Strawberry-flavored Fig Jam

When figs are very ripe, try this recipe for fig jam (strawberry- or blackberry- flavored).

6 cups mashed figs (about 9 heaping cups, whole)
6 cups sugar
4 small packages (2 large) strawberry-flavored gelatin
½ lemon, sliced

Add sugar, gelatin and lemon to figs. Bring slowly to boil, and boil 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Fill sterilized jars to within 1/4 inch of top. Process in boiling water canner 5 minutes.

Canned Figs

All home-canned figs must be acidified before canning in a boiling water canner to make them safe from the microorganism that causes botulism.

An average of 16 pounds is needed per canner load of 7 quarts; an average of 11 pounds is needed per canner load of 9 pints—an average of 2-1/2 pounds yields 1 quart.

Wash figs thoroughly in clean water. Drain. Do not peel or remove stems. Cover figs with water and boil 2 minutes. Drain. Gently boil figs in light syrup (1-1/2 cups sugar and 5-3/4 cups water) for 5 minutes.

Add 2 tablespoons bottled lemon juice per quart or 1 tablespoon per pint to the jars; or add 1/2 teaspoon citric acid per quart or 1/4 teaspoon per pint to the jars. Fill hot jars with hot figs and cooking syrup, leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Remove air bubbles and adjust headspace if needed. Wipe rims of jars with a dampened clean paper towel. Adjust lids and process in boiling water canner: 45 minutes for pints and 50 minutes for quarts.

Pickled Figs

Select firm, ripe figs. Wash thoroughly and drain or clean in boiling water as above. Cook figs until tender in a syrup made from 2 cups of sugar to 1 quart of water.

When figs are tender, add remaining 4 cups sugar, vinegar and cinnamon, cloves and allspice tied in a bag and mace. Cook until figs are clear and transparent. Allow to stand in syrup overnight. Pack fruit into clean jars: cover with syrup to within ½ inch of top. Wipe sealing edge clean; adjust lids. Process pint jars in boiling water bath for 20 minutes.

5 quarts figs
1 quart water
6 cups sugar
1 pint vinegar
1 tablespoon stick cinnamon, broken
1 tablespoon whole cloves
1 tablespoon whole allspice
1 teaspoon mace



Oven-dried Figs

A space-saver. A candied-type product, rich in flavor. Great for snacks; for baking cookies and cakes, muffins or breads.

Ripe figs
Sugar syrup made from:
1 cup sugar
3 cup water

Wash figs. Dissolve sugar in water; bring to boil. Add figs and simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from heat: let figs stand in syrup 10 minutes. Lift out, drain and cool. Place in single layer on drying rack (a broiler-pan rack or cake rack will do). Set oven at lowest temperature. A low, even temperature of 115 F to 120 F should be maintained for about 10 to 20 hours. Leave door propped open slightly for moisture to escape. A small fan aired inside the oven will shorten drying time. If a gas oven is used, be sure that it doesn't go out.

Figs should be dried until the outsides are firm to the touch, and the insides soft with no signs of syrup when squeezed. It won't be difficult to learn when they are dried -- at most any stage, they can be used.

Dried Figs

Select fully ripe fruit. Wash or clean well with a damp towel. Peel dark-skinned varieties if desired. Leave whole if small or partly dried on tree; cut large figs in halves or slices. If drying whole figs, crack skins by dipping in boiling water for 30 seconds. For cut figs, dip in ascorbic acid or other antimicrobial solution for 10 minutes. Remove and drain well. Arrange in single layers on trays.

Dry at 140 F in an oven or dehydrator until leathery and pliable. The length of time needed to dry the figs depends on the size of the pieces being dried, humidity and the amount of air circulation in the dehydrator or oven. Also, products generally will dry more quickly in convection ovens or electric dehydrators than in conventional ovens. Figs should be dried until the outsides are firm to the touch, and the insides soft with no signs of syrup when squeezed.

Sun-dried Figs (An energy saver!)

Figs dry well outside on hot, sunny days. They should dry in about two days. Bring in at sundown. They also dry well inside a car parked in the sun, with a window opened about 1 inch. Fully ripe figs are sweeter, more flavorful when dried.

Wash ripe figs, leaving stems on. Cut completely in half to stem. Turn cut side up on drying rack. Cover with a piece of cheesecloth or nylon net to keep insects off. Put drying rack on table, car, roof, etc. In full sun. Dry until outside is leathery but pliable. Inside should be soft, with no sign of juice.

Storing Dried Figs

Fruit that might have been exposed to insects (including fruit flies and Indian meal moths) before or during the drying process should be pasteurized to destroy insect eggs. To destroy insects, place packaged figs in freezer for 48 hours. Remove and package promptly for permanent storage. You can also pasteurize fruit by placing in a 150 F oven for 30 minutes. Cool.

Pack cooled, dried fruit in small amounts in dry, scalded glass jars (preferably dark) or in moisture- and vapor-proof freezer containers, boxes or bags. Storage life will be increased if they are stored in the refrigerator or freezer in moisture-proof bags or containers.

Examine figs occasionally when they are stored at room temperature. If there are signs of moisture, reheat, cool and repack.

Fig-filled Cookies

½ cup shortening
½ cup brown sugar
½ cup white sugar
2 eggs
2 cup flour
¾ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon soda
1 teaspoon vanilla

Cream shortening; add sugars, beat until fluffy. Add eggs, mix well. Sift together dry ingredients; add to egg mixture. Stir in vanilla. Chill thoroughly (dough is very sticky). Roll ¼-inch thick on floured surface. Cut with floured cookie cutter. Place a teaspoon of filling on one cookie; top with another and press edges together with floured fork tines, or put filling on one half of cookie, fold other half over. Press edges together. Bake on greased cookie sheet in 400 F oven about 10 minutes.

Make your own Fig Newtons.

Roll dough in narrow rectangles, spread filling on one side, fold other half over, bake and cut in bars.

Filling

1 cup chopped dried figs* (snip with kitchen scissors)
1/4 cup sugar
1/3 cup water
½ cup chopped pecans (optional)
1 tablespoon lemon juice

Cook figs, sugar and water until thick, stirring often (about 5 minutes). Add nuts and lemon juice. Cool.

*Or dates or fig preserves, drained.

Fig Cake

1 spice cake mix, sifted
4 medium or small eggs (3 large)
1 box instant vanilla pudding
1 cup water
½ cup oil
¾ cup chopped fig preserves
½ cup chopped pecans (optional)

Mix the first five ingredients, fold in figs and nuts. Pour into greased and floured tube pan and bake at 350 F for about 40-45 minutes, or until done. Glaze if desired. Stays moist. Freezes well. Delicious warm with a warm lemon sauce.

References

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