



GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

"I am once more seated under my own Vine and Fig tree, and hope to spend the remainder of my days...in peaceful retirement, making political pursuits yield to the more rational amusements of cultivating the earth."

George Washington to Dr. James Anderson
April 7, 1797

We have moved on from the continuous rainfall that plagued us earlier this season to extreme heat and humidity. Although rain is of course good for a garden, too much can cause problems. In the 18th century John Bordley advised that in a kitchen garden the "soil should be of a pliable nature and easy to work; but by no means wet; and two feet, at least, deep."

In September 1775 Landon Carter wrote that to his surprise Colonel Tayloe's figs were quite tasteless and he attributed their quality to "such a prodigious effect has these rains on them."

I did not find that to be the case with our figs at the Geddy House this season. Unlike last year when none of our figs ripened, this year's crop grew large and tasty.

Philip Fithian wrote in his diary that he could not endure figs, but he did mention how the ladies seemed to be fond of them as they gathered them in the garden.

There was a Virginia tradition of pickling figs. The receipt combined a quart of boiled vinegar with five sticks of cinnamon, a tablespoon of whole clover allspice, and celery seed. Washed and dried figs were dropped into the mix and cooked for 20 minutes.

With the figs from the Geddy House I made a simple fig jam this year. The recipe combined the ripe figs with some chopped lemon, cinnamon, and ground cloves. For the 2 ¼ cups of sugar I used the sugar substitute called Splenda. It turned out very good and is all gone!

Figs are among the oldest fruits in cultivation. In ancient times figs were a sacred fruit.

On the walls of a twelfth-dynasty Egyptian grave there appears a fig-harvesting scene. They were grown in Crete in 1500 B.C. Pliny and Columella in the first century both mention figs. Aristotle recorded facts about figs in the fourth century B.C. The bible tells us about the way Adam and Even sewed fig leaves together into aprons for themselves in Genesis 3:7.

In 1629 Capt. John Smith reported that "Mistriss Pearce harvested neere a hundred bushels of excellent figges." This she did on a three or four acre garden in Jamestown, Virginia.

The Franciscan Missionaries in San Diego, California, introduced many old world plants in 1769, and figs were among them.

In England on Sundays during Lent fig pies were served to commemorate the day when Jesus desired to eat figs along the road to Bethany.

William Prince's Nursery Catalogue in Long Island, New York, listed fig trees for sale for 2 shillings each in 1790.

George Washington grew Brown Turkey figs in his lower garden. Thomas Jefferson also grew figs in his orchard of over 400 fruit trees. In his garden book Jefferson mentions planting figs and also covering them and other tender plants in the fall. He grew Angelica, Brown Turkey, and Marseilles. He was experimenting with the figs from France. In a letter to William Drayton he wrote that figs were so familiar to the colonies that, "nothing need be said."

Figs never ripen satisfactorily off the tree. Fruit tree borers can be combated by planting a few cloves of garlic under the fruit trees.

Although temperatures below 5 degrees will kill fig trees to the ground, new shoots will sprout from the roots again.

Medicinally, figs have been used as a remedy for boils and abscesses for ages. A decoction of fig juice was often used for pectoral infections, sore throats, and coughs. There is an old English proverb,

"Fig poultice will our bodies rid of tumours,
scrofula, boils and even peccant humours,
Twill surely draw off poppy heads alone,
The splintered fragments from a broken bone."

Figs can also act as a laxative, so I offer a word of caution. It is not wise to over-indulge in figs.

Janet Guthrie