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Home is where the figs grow

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: The second crop of figs on the Desert King. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

Since my childhood, there's always been a fig tree at the edge of my habitation.

In Arizona, it was a Black Mission fig, planted by the previous owners of our house. Birds had come to understand it better than we could — in a good year, we harvested five to seven figs.

In New York, it was a Chicago hardy fig that I foolishly planted at the perimeter of my deck, about 10 feet from my foundation. It was a cold-hardy cultivar that, even when it died back under winter snows, would always resprout with amazing vigor.

On Harstine Island, my first fig was a desert king. It has assumed a regal bearing, fruits generously and will need some serious pruning when it goes dormant so I can reach the fruits without a cherry-picker.

Figs are the oldest cultivated fruit tree. Evidence of their propagation around human dwellings dates to 11,400 years ago in an early neolithic village in Jordan, and they're mentioned in the Bible almost 200 times.

Their symbiotic relationships are more complex than mere human and avian propagation. All figs are pollinated by wasps of the family Agaonidae, which are so tiny they usually go unnoticed.

The flowers bloom inside of the immature figs, attracting female wasps who squiggle through the ostiole (the little hole that's a wasp chute) at the base of the fig. The opening is so tight that they often lose their wings and pieces of antenna.

These wasps lay their eggs inside the flowers. Those wasps themselves were born in figs and take pollen from those figs to those in which they lay eggs. The males are born in figs and never leave them, born wingless for the sole purpose of mating with females in the figs. In some species, males are chivalrous enough to chew openings for the females to escape and pollinate other figs.

If this all sounds pretty horrifying, don't worry. Commercial figs are usually sprayed with hormones instead. A traditional method of ripening from Minorca, Spain, directs dabbing olive oil on the ostiole, which ripens figs in a couple of days.

The ethylene gas that figs emit from the ostiole when they begin to ripen may have a role in attracting pollinating wasps. Trapping that gas causes the figs to ripen immediately, much as ethylene gas is used

to ripen bananas, tomatoes and other fruit.

If you're eating figs from nonindustrial trees, wasps aren't left in them: maturing figs dissolve wasp remains with an enzyme called ficin and absorb the nutrients for their own development. Ficin is so powerful that indigenous groups in Central America use it to disintegrate intestinal worms.

I've heard mixed tales on fig cropping. A friend in Seattle gets two harvests of figs from her tree, but I find they don't ripen before freezing on Harstine. My desert king has a couple of dozen juvenile figs on it right now, and with our increasingly hot summers, I might enjoy another bumper crop.

A word of caution about planting figs. They have shallow and wide-ranging root systems, as the buyer of my New York house might have discovered by now. They should be planted far from buildings and septic fields.

Mine are near roads and have their toes stepped on by frequent traffic, but this trait makes me reconsider planting them as erosion barriers. Because they're easily started from cuttings and rooted in water, I might yet make a kingdom of my desert king.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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