If you allow yourself to be even a little adventurous, life can give you some interesting surprises. Here I am, middle-aged and raised by parents with an adventurous spirit when it came to food, discovering something new. Before this, I’d only had access to the product in the form of the fig newton. But thanks to some friends, Sheryl Huston and master gardener Jim Mast, I had my first taste of a fresh fig, eaten right off the tree. I’m not sure how I missed out on such a wonderful tasting fruit. Even though I like Fig Newtons, this was another dimension entirely!

Western Asia seems to be the source of figs, but they have spread throughout the Mediterranean. Figs have been found in ancient sites dating to at least 5000 BC.

While they will struggle to grow in some of the colder areas of the county, those of us lucky to live at lower elevations can grow them. Just make sure you have room to grow them; they are quite a large tree. Some varieties can grow to 50 feet; more likely, though, it’s 10 to 30 feet—still a considerable-sized tree. The tree generally spreads wider than tall with heavy twisted branches. The wood is not very strong and decays easily. Sap from the tree is milky and can irritate skin.

The leaves of the fig are large and bright green, lobed and rough and hairy on the upper surface and soft and hairy on the lower surfaces. It is a very tropical-looking plant. The flowers are actually hidden inside the green fruit, a syconium. Some fig varieties require no pollination for the fruit to develop, others need a small wasp to enter the syconium to pollinate the flowers.
Figs can develop more than one crop per year. An early spring crop, called the breba crop, comes from flowers that form on last season’s growth. In cooler areas this crop is usually destroyed by spring frosts. The second, fall crop, which forms on new growth, is usually the main crop. The fruit has a tough peel, usually green or green suffused with brown or purple, which may crack on ripening. The interior contains a seed mass within jelly-like flesh. Edible seeds are numerous and usually hollow, unless they have been pollinated. Pollinated seeds provide a nutty taste in dried figs.

While I have seen a large fig tree, that didn’t receive special care, growing in the middle of a pecan orchard, you might want to take some care with younger trees. Branches can be sensitive to heat and sun damage and need to be whitewashed if portions are exposed to a lot of sun. Roots can spread voraciously but can be cut when encountered in flower beds. The trees can be espaliered and grown in containers. Plants in containers should be repotted about every three years and shade the tub to prevent overheating. Figs are also tolerant of poorer soils, including poorly drained soils and infertile soils, but obviously they will grow better with some fertilizer in poor soils and deep watering in the summer. Go easy on the nitrogen, which produces leaves and not much fruit. Only fertilize if the branches of the tree grew less than a foot the previous year. Apply a total of 1/2 to 1 pound of actual nitrogen over three applications, starting in late winter or early spring and ending by July.

Young fig trees will need to be watered regularly until they are fully established. Mature trees need water at least once every week or two and need to be watered deeply. Mulching will help maintain moisture in the soil. If the leaves turn yellow and drop, it is likely the plant is not getting enough water. Water-stressed trees will also not bear fruit.

It is important to prune figs correctly; otherwise you could lose one year’s crop. If you have the space, you really don’t need to prune at all, but, if you want to keep the plant from overtaking something, you do not want to prune in the winter! Since the fruit is borne on the new growth, if you prune in the winter you will prune out the fruit-bearing branches. Prune after the main crop is harvested or, if you have late ripening cultivars, summer prune half the branches and prune the remainder the following summer. Any radical pruning done removes shade to the trunk and branches, so paint the exposed branches to protect them from the sun.

In our area, figs may need some frost protection. They generally can survive temperatures of 12° to 15°F if the plant is completely dormant. If the tree is actively growing, it may suffer damage even if the temperatures go to 30°F. The good news is that they will often resprout from the roots. If you can provide some protection during the winter would be helpful. Also, keep the soil dry during its dormancy. Don’t allow standing water around the plant. In our dry climate, they will need to be watered in the winter—just don’t over water!

I have bad news for some folks, but gophers love figs and can easily kill a large plant. Keep them away! Some fruit beetles can damage the fruit. There are a variety of diseases, virus, cankers and smuts that can attack the trees and fruits. Keep the trees healthy and debris raked up under the tree and you will help prevent some of these from taking hold. Good cultural practices are the best defense against problems.

Do not harvest the fruit until ripe. Once picked they will not ripen further. The fig should be slightly soft and starting to bend at the neck. Harvest gently, as they bruise easily. Figs do not keep well fresh and can only be stored 2-3 days in the refrigerator. Some varieties dry well and can be stored six to eight months.
Figs can easily be propagated by cuttings so, if you have a friend with a fig you like, ask if you could take a few cuttings. The cuttings should be about 10 to 16 inches long from a tree that is at least two to three years old. Make sure you can identify which end is up, because if you plant them upside down, they will not root. One of the easy ways to do this is when you do the cuts, cut the bottom end on a slant, the top flat and then a quick look will tell you which way to plant them. Bury the cutting vertically with three quarters of its length underground in sand or dirt. Keep them in a cooler area and avoid direct sun. The coolness helps slow down the growth of the leaves. They are known to sprout leaves before roots and they can't support that growth without the roots. The soil should be moist at all times, but not soggy. Leave them until fall; by then they should have formed roots.

These are figs that were recommended for the Phoenix area, which is the closest I could get to Yavapai County.

**Brown Turkey** (also known as Black Spanish, San Pedro;) Good garden tree, large brownish purple fruit, better fresh.

**Conadria**: Medium greenish-yellow skin with a purplish tinge, strawberry-colored flesh, good fresh, excellent dried.

**Kadota**: No breba crop, medium greenish-yellow skin, amber flesh, excellent fresh, excellent dried.

**Mission** (also known as Black mission:) Large purple black fig, excellent fresh, excellent dried.

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**2nd Notice**

I am repeating this article because apparently very few people have contacted the Extension office about their newsletter. Please do, otherwise this will be your last one!

At the last MG Association Meeting there were some policy changes made concerning this newsletter. We discussed a variety of options but finally decided on charging a subscription rate for a paper copy of the newsletter. The cost of mailing the newsletter has relentlessly grown even as we have cut down on the number we mail. Rising prices for paper, printing and especially postage has pushed the price of mailing out the newsletter to approximately two thousand dollars each year. It has reached a point where it is difficult for the Cooperative Extension office to pick up the cost. The subscription fee is being instituted to cover the cost of the newsletter if you want to receive a paper copy. For those who don’t mind getting an electronic version it will still be free. Below are your options for receiving the newsletter. You must make a decision before January 1. After that your name will be dropped from the mailing list.

**Newsletter distribution options effective January, 2006:**

- Subscribe annually (11 issues/yr) for mailed copy; $15 per year; make check out to U of A and mail to Prescott Ext Ofc by January 5, 2006. Subscription requests received after January 5th will NOT be prorated.
- Pick up a paper copy in the Cottonwood or Prescott Ext Ofc for $1
- Check U of A website – newsletter is posted by the 5th of each month
- Receive monthly e-mail notice, with link to the newsletter on the U of A website. If MGs are already on Mary Barnes’ e-mail group code, they will automatically receive the monthly notice. If they are not on Mary’s group code, but want a monthly e-mail notice when the newsletter is posted on the website they should send an e-mail request to Karen Pizzuto (kpizzuto@ag.arizona.edu).
Two years after moving to Prescott with her husband Ron, Eunice Ricklefs enrolled in the 2001 MG class and soon became a member of the committee that founded the Master Gardener Association. Present at every Master Gardener Association meeting as secretary, she provides all members with accurate and timely minutes of association meetings. In addition to her duties as secretary, Eunice enjoys volunteering for a variety of activities, including supervising MG participation in the Prescott Farmers Market, co-chairing the social/picnic committee and staffing the U of A County Extension Office booth at the Yavapai County Fair.

Born and raised in Leicester (pronounced Lester,) England, Eunice notes that the family’s terrace house had no indoor plumbing nor outdoor garden space. But counties did rent land allotments on the outskirts of town, where Eunice and her sister helped their father grow vegetables and flowers. She also helped salt and jar beans and peas that were then stored in the basement. Although she was a good student who won a scholarship to an academic high school, Eunice decided to forego college and enter the workplace at 16. She initially worked in the accounting department of a well-known shoe manufacturer. When she decided she wanted to work in the United States, she saved money for the trip by working three jobs: weekdays she worked in accounting for a sweater manufacturer; 3 nights a week she drew beer in a pub and Saturday mornings she washed hair in a salon. In one year, she had enough money, a 2-year U.S. work permit and sponsorship by her cousins in Los Angeles. Arriving in the U.S. in 1958, Eunice secured a job with a major oil company in downtown LA. In 1960, she married Ron and settled into a busy life raising two sons and one daughter in the San Fernando Valley. One event she proudly remembers occurred in 1971 at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles. Her parents even flew over from England to watch their daughter become an American citizen.

In the mid-seventies, Eunice returned to work as an executive secretary for a commercial construction company, but gardening was still a big part of her life. She and Ron planted and maintained a vegetable garden and a number of fruit trees (orange, grapefruit, plum, peach and apple) and grapes. When they moved to their home in Prescott in 1999, the backyard was full of overgrown natives right up to the backdoor. As the drought continued and the fire danger increased, their community (Timber Ridge) was landscaped by the fire department to become the first fire-wise community in Prescott. Left with a virtually clean slate (some native trees and shrubs were left,) Eunice decided to surround her home with an English garden where paths lead to something new around every corner.

Eunice brings her love of gardening to her church, where she and Ron are revitalizing the landscape. When not gardening, traveling, reading or doing crossword puzzles (yes, she admits to being an addict,) she seeks to serve her community in a number of ways. As a volunteer with Prescott People Who Care, Eunice visits an older woman with Alzheimer’s every Wednesday. She talks and walks with her, does a little bookkeeping for her and makes and takes her to doctor’s appointments. She is helping her “maintain her independence and quality of life.” She has also co-chaired Empty Bowls, an annual event where participants purchase bowls donated by local potters and fill them with soup donated by local restaurants. The proceeds are then distributed among the five area food banks.

Eunice is happiest when she is actively serving her community. We thank Eunice for finding time in her very busy schedule to continue serving as secretary for the Master Gardener Association and volunteering for other projects.
Tagetes lucida
Mexican Mint Marigold or Mexican Tarragon
by Nora Graf

Everyone knows marigolds. We’ve all seen mile after mile of trays of little button marigolds at the local garden centers. They have that typical less-than-thrilling marigold smell and bloom all summer long. But did you know that there is a marigold that prefers blooming late summer and fall and has culinary value? Well, meet Tagetes lucida!

A Native of Guatemala and Oaxaca, Mexico, this is a summer plant but is classified as a tender perennial. It doesn’t like extreme temperatures, like next to a sidewalk in Phoenix, but should do well in our climate. The flowers are deep yellow with five petals per flower. They are much simpler than the modern double marigolds, but with lots of the perky yellow blooms floating over bright green foliage they will brighten up any space in the garden. The plant forms an erect bushy shrub two to three feet tall with the blooms forming at the end of the branches. Leaves are fine-toothed and contain essential oils similar to tarragon.

Water the plant regularly in the summer. If it gets too hot it may start to die back, but just give it a good watering and it should come back. It needs a well-drained soil and is fairly drought tolerant. It is hardy to about 20°F, so it might survive milder winters, but you can also put it into a pot in the fall and move it indoors for the winter. In many years it should just freeze back and sprout again in the spring. If you winter it over, the only special care it needs is a shearing in the spring to keep the plant bushy and blooming.

T. lucida can be propagated through layering, division or stem cuttings in early spring and can be grown from seed. In higher elevations this should take place in early summer. Seeds can be started indoors 6 – 8 weeks prior to planting out after the last frost.

In the landscape, it can be a specimen plant or part of a border. Plant about a foot apart in groups. Plant close to where you or your pets walk, as brushing up against it releases a delightful fragrance. As a bonus it also attracts beneficial insects!

As to its culinary uses, it can be made into a tea using the leaves or as a replacement for french tarragon but at a lighter rate as it tends to have a more powerful flavor. You can use the chopped leaves in vinegar’s, butter and cheese spreads and they are especially good in egg and fish dishes.

While it can be found in nurseries, occasionally you might have to mail order plants or seeds.

Mountain Valley Growers (these folks have a great selection of herbs, including organically grown plants and interesting newsletters)
www.mountainvalleygrowers.com
559-338-2775
38325 Pepperweed Road
Squaw Valley, CA 93675

Compost Made Easy
a tip from Organic Gardening Magazine

Fill a plastic garbage bag with leaves and some grass clippings. Poke some holes in the bag and wet the leaves. Scoop a shovelful of soil into the bag and shake it. Shake the bag every few weeks and moisten the leaves if they dry out. Next spring you’ll have dark, crumbly leaf mold! Click here for a complete compost primer.
While the curious popularity of Sport Utility Vehicles might seem invincible in today’s consumer market, just wait a minute. American car buyers are notoriously fickle creatures and will shed their love for these behemoth-sized vehicles just as quickly as they did for the fin-tailed dinosaurs of yesterday. It may be a new oil crisis, war or simply another fad. Whatever the reason, the world will soon be awash in unwanted and unmarketable SUV’s. Backyards and driveways will be cluttered with the junks of their owners’ former passion, as consumers rush out to pursue the next craze.

For the innovative gardener, faced with high disposal costs, a good option might be to simply plant the SUV with one’s favorite flowers or ground covers. The spacious interiors of these vehicles provide abundant opportunities for creative expression.

One should give careful thought to final placement of the planter. While an SUV garden might look very nice in the middle of the driveway or garage, invariably there may arise conflicting uses for these spaces. The vehicle could simply be driven out to the center of the front or backyard and parked in the chosen location. A more aesthetic look can be achieved, however, by partially burying the SUV so that it blends in better with the site. Considerable care should be taken in digging out the shape and size of the excavation, as the vehicle is not easily extracted once it’s in the hole. One pleasing possibility is to angle the SUV inside the hole in such a way that it appears to be projecting out of the earth, which can provide an elemental look to the landscape. Rocks and gravel should be used around the base of the car to better blend in the whole.

Care should also be taken to properly drain the fuel tank, as the danger of fuel leakage constitutes an unacceptable environmental hazard. All vents should be left open to insure proper drainage. Once the topsoil is in place (figure on at least a couple of tons) and properly amended, thought can be given to the windows and doors and how much they are to be left open. This depends not only on the choice of plant material but also on whether you desire a closed in, formal look or an open, flowing pattern. If your SUV has power windows and you forgot to open them before putting down the soil, you might be out of luck. For those gardeners in temperate climates, one possibility is to leave the doors and windows closed and to utilize the enclosed space as a greenhouse.

However you decide to plant it, your SUV garden is sure to bring you many happy hours of enjoyment. With its bright spots of color popping through the windows and spilling out from the hood, you will wonder why you never did this before.
MG News

The Camp Verde Pecan and Wine Festival is the second weekend in February. Contact Mary Barnes if you want to help.

If you are interested in taking a gourd crafting class, I will be scheduling one for the Master Gardeners in Prescott for early next year. I don’t have a date yet, but email or call me to be put on the list for notification after I figure out the details. It will likely be on a Sunday. Nora Graf 928-567-6703, mesquite2@hotmail.com

Well, another year is almost over. Hard to believe. My year has been pretty good, my job has gotten to be fun again (at least some of the time anyway,) my stress levels are way down. I had tremendous gourd sales, thanks to the folks at the MG Conference, so my hobby is still paying for itself, plus some. My garden went in late and I had a huge crop of tomatoes, at least until it froze and I lost everything. I did pick all the basil before it froze though. There were unexpected delights like a reblooming iris actually reblooming in early fall. The rest of my iris were spectacular and of course I bought more. I found a couple of sand penstemons and planted them in front. I really hope they make it. I’ve had trouble finding them. I’m making a bit more progress on getting rid of the burmuda grass in the front yard. It’s still really persistant in some locations, but I think I finally have it on the run.

The bad news is that I pretty much have closed down my greenhouse. I had problems with the misting systems, I never did get the repairs made to the cooler, it needed more heavy muscle power, power tools and expertise, so I managed to fry most everything. With the cost of electricity and natural gas going up, I’ve just given up for now. I lost all my orchids and a few other things. I can still use it for sprouting vegetables and flowers next year, but I’m not going to be growing anything fragile, at least for awhile. A new misting system is on the way and hopefully I can get the cooler up and running again for next summer.

Last I would like to thank Paul Diemer and Marilyn Perkins for editing my newsletter. They try to correct my mistakes, grammar and punctuation. One of these days I’m just going to quit using commas altogether since I never get them right anyway. Both do a great job of making this newsletter as letter perfect as it is. Any mistakes are mine. Enjoy all the catalogs coming out now and my advice is try something new. You never know when you will discover something wonderful—who would have thought—figs.

Nora Graf
Editor, Yavapai Gardens

FROM THE EDITOR: Please send or email articles and announcements to the address below. Long articles will go in as soon as possible, announcements must be in by the 15th of the month to be included. Nora Graf
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