

MEDICINAL PLANTS

Ficus carica

Isabella C. Grima, Pharmacy Student

Ficus carica, a member of the Moraceae family, is the domestic fig, a palatable and nutritious fruit. The ancient Egyptians called the fig, **teb**, and the earliest Hebrew writings speak of the fig under the name, **teenah**, which leaves its trace in the Arabic, **tin**, the same name for the fig in Maltese⁽¹⁾.

Varieties⁽²⁾

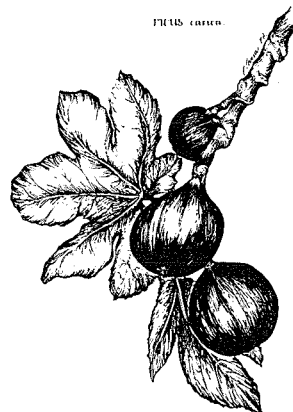
Various horticultural varieties exist in Malta, the most popular being the Parsott, the common White Fig (Tina Bajda), and the St. John's Fig (Tina ta' San Gwann). Varieties not only differ in physical appearance and taste, but also in the method of fertilisation; in that certain varieties are self-pollinating whereas others depend on 'caprification' for pollination. Caprification involves the pollination of the fig variety by the pollen grains of the wild fig variety — **Caprificus**, transported by an insect, **Blastophaga grossorum**.

Historical and medicinal importance

The fig is one of the oldest fruit known to man, and this fruit originated in the Mediterranean countries, and was subsequently introduced in other countries. The fig has been mentioned in Greek, Roman and Hebrew literature, amongst which the Bible, and was attributed numerous medicinal properties. It was one of the ingredients of the 'universal antidote' compounded for plagues and poisons⁽³⁾; was thought to prevent piles if carried in one's pocket in a dried form; was effective as a poultice on boils⁽⁴⁾; and exerted laxative effects when consumed both fresh or dried.

Constituents

Fresh figs contain around 20% total carbohydrates, around 2.5% dietary fibre, a number of vitamins, together with a high content of potassium, which helps to maintain the body acid-alkaline balance. The dried figs contain a far higher amount of carbohydrates (around 70%) and dietary fibre (around 17%) as a result of moisture removal, but contain lower amounts of vitamins as a result of industrial processing⁽⁵⁾.



Laxative property

The laxative value of figs has been recognised far and wide, but attempts to isolate the agent responsible for such an action were far from successful. The recent hypothesis on the benefits of dietary fibre proposed by Burkitt, and the gradual understanding of the mechanism of action of the dietary fibre components on the human gastrointestinal tract, has prompted researchers to agree with L.E. Sayre, who way back in 1906, stated that the laxative action of figs was due to the fibre content and the indigestible seeds.⁽³⁾

Fig preparations

The only official preparation containing figs listed in the British Pharmacopoeia is 'Compound Fig Elixir B.P.', which is indicated for use in constipation. This preparation contains a number of stimulant laxatives besides an aqueous extract of figs, and the efficacy of the preparation is due to the former substances. Other proprietary preparations are designed on this official preparation.

References

- (1) Sackett, C., Figs — Fruit and vegetables facts and pointers; United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, (1976).
- (2) Haslam S.M., Sell P.D., & Wolseley, P.A., A Flora of the Maltese Islands. Malta University Press, pg 14 (1977).
- (3) Condit, I.J., Chemistry and Food Value IN: The Fig-Chronica Botanica Co., Waltham, Massachusetts, pg 148-155 (1947).
- (4) Cassar, P., Medical Folklore IN: Medical History of Malta, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, pg 425 (1964).
- (5) USDA Agriculture Handbook No 8-9 (1982)