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## FIGS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19



focused his gardening science on blackberries, corn and other common backyard crops.

Brian Melton, in Fresno, has about 400 varieties on his property, and Rigo Amador, a collector in Florida who helped launch a site called Fig Database (figdatabase.com), says he has cataloged roughly a thousand genetically unique figs growing in the world's collections, and there are almost certainly thousands more.

So prolific are private collectors that they have outpaced even government germplasm collection programs. The UC Davis-USDA Wolfskill Experimental Orchard, near Winters, used to be regarded among hobbyist fruit growers as the bearer of the torch when it comes to rare figs. The facility still serves as a gene bank for many tree fruit species, but its 300-something fig varieties, many acquired through

labor-intensive expeditions to Albania, Georgia and Azerbaijan, represent just a fraction of the *Ficus carica* gene pool.

**The proliferation of new varieties** on the market has, in some opinions, blown out of control. By some estimates, a new variety is introduced almost once a week during fig season.

"All these new, terrific figs keep coming along, but if you're chasing new seedlings, you can't keep up," said Gary Pennington, a gardener and fig collector in western Sonoma County.

Pennington has focused his collecting mainly on established varieties, grown for centuries in Europe. Nearby, in Sebastopol, Achilles Stravoravdis is building a backyard fig library oriented toward berry-flavored varieties. Bassem Samaan, a Pennsylvania collector and owner of the Trees of Joy online nursery, is known for his assembly of Middle Eastern figs.

Durtschi says he particularly enjoys growing—and tasting—California seedling figs, though he shops overseas, too. He once spent \$600 for a small copy of a tree called Cessac, found a few years ago growing from the crumbling ruins of a French castle (a classic European example of fig wasp progeny). Such expenses may even out; Durtschi says he once sold a Boysenberry Blush fig tree for \$1,025.

Superstar status is generally short-lived for any fig variety. The Swiss fig called Ponte Tresa became so hotly sought after five or six years ago after a few photos of its dripping red interior floated across the internet that the mother tree was hacked apart by enthusiasts who wanted a piece of it. The fervor cooled as copies of the tree circulated and spread, and today Ponte Tresa is relatively commonplace. Some collectors have even said it was, after so much fuss, overrated.

## A well-known passage in the

Bible calls for prosperous men to sit beneath their own fig tree. I often think of this as I walk among my own trees, for nearly all are less than 3 feet tall.

But figs grow quickly, and even this summer, I expect my small trees to reach head-height and bear a substantial crop.

"What are you going to do with them all?" a neighbor asked.

"I can eat a lot of figs," I said.

I have about 30 small trees in the ground, and while I certainly don't need many more, it sounds like the Angelito fig is a must-have.

Durtschi recently told me that a fig called Colonel Littman's Black Cross is perhaps the best he's tasted. It, too, is now on my wish list.

Other varieties will arrive unexpectedly, I know. A neighbor fig grower recently invited me over to collect some extra trees. I drove over and filled my car with eight potted trees, including the highly regarded Genovese Nero, Hative d'Argenteuil and LSU Tiger.

"Where does it stop?!" I recently wrote to a trader as we negotiated an exchange.

"It never ends," he replied. □

