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Fruits from Paradise

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Both the Bible and the Qur'an extol the virtues of figs.

Figs contain high levels of health-promoting antioxidants.

Fruits from Paradise

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

Figs make a satisfying dessert. They are lusciously sweet with a texture that combines the chewiness of their flesh, the smoothness of their skin and the crunchiness of their seeds. When the fruit is dried, the numerous edible seeds provide a nutty flavor. The army of King David was treated to 200 cakes of figs from Abigail, the peacemaker.

The fig tree, a member of the Mulberry family and mentioned in the Garden of Eden, originated in Southwest Asia. In Bible imagery the fig tree symbolized peace, prosperity and fruitfulness. In Deuteronomy, figs were one of seven foods God promised the Hebrews upon entering the Promised Land.

Figs were important in ancient Greek culture. They were held in such high esteem by the Greeks that they created laws forbidding the export of the best quality figs. Greek athletes ate figs to improve their strength and endurance. Fig laurels were awarded to athletes who won at the Olympics.

Dried figs are used for their sweetening properties and appear in bread, pastries, confectionery, fruit cakes, jams and desserts. The pear-shaped fruits ripen to green, purple or a brown color. Of the 150 varieties of figs, the most common are the golden-colored Calimyrna, and the dark, purplish Mission figs. Unlike other fruits, figs ripen throughout the summer and into the fall. Since they don't store or transport easily, most figs end up in the dried form.

Figs are a rich source of calcium, iron and dietary fiber, and a wide variety of health-promoting phytochemicals including lignans and tannins. The fiber in figs provides them with useful laxative properties. Three to four figs provide



about 20 percent of the daily value for fiber. The low sodium, low fat and high potassium content of figs make them useful in diets to lower blood pressure. Figs are also a good source of the trace minerals manganese and copper.

Figs also contain coumarins, terpenoids and benzaldehyde, known anti-tumor compounds. Benzaldehyde has been successfully used to retard cancer growth in terminally ill patients. Figs contain high levels of many antioxidant flavonoids, including quercetin, such as found in apples and sweet cherries. Flavonoids protect one against cardiovas-

cular disease and cancer. Due to their good supply of calcium and boron, figs may help protect against osteoporosis.

Fig products were used medicinally in ancient times. The ancient Egyptians used figs internally for stomach problems and as a purgative, and externally for back pain and skin conditions. King Hezekiah applied a poultice of figs to his boils for healing. Figs are mentioned many times in the Qur'an. Muhammad stated that if there was a fruit descended from paradise it would surely be the fig. He advised people to eat figs as they prevented hemorrhoids, and helped gout.

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