

POMARIUM BRITANNICUM:

AN

HISTORICAL AND BOTANICAL ACCOUNT

OF

FRUITS,

KNOWN IN GREAT BRITAIN.

BY

HENRY PHILLIPS.

*Δένδρα δ' ὑψιπέτητα κατακρῆθαι χεῖε καρπὸν,
'Ογγυαὶ καὶ ρόσαι, καὶ μηλέαι ἀγλαόκαρποι,
Συκαὶ τε γλυκεραὶ, καὶ ἔλαιαι τηλεθώσσαι.*

HOM. ODYSS.

"I have often been astonished at our indifference respecting the applause of those who have introduced useful plants into their country, the fruits of which are to this day so delightful. The names of these public benefactors are chiefly unknown, whilst their benefits pass from generation to generation: whereas, those of the destroyers of the human race are handed down to us in every page, as if we took more account of our enemies than our friends."

ST. PIERRE.

LONDON:

HENRY COLBURN AND Co.

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1821.

FIG.—FICUS.—CARICA.

Natural Order, Scabridæ. In Botany, a Genus of the Polygamia Triœcia Class.

THE fig-tree is evidently a native of that part of Asia, where the garden of Eden is generally said to have been situated, as it is the only tree particularly named in those passages of the Bible which relate to the creation and fall of man. "And they sewed fig-leaves together, and made themselves aprons." It is a fruit that appears to have been highly esteemed by the Israelites, who brought figs out of the land of Canaan, when they were sent by Moses to ascertain the produce and strength of that country.

The fig-tree is often mentioned, both in the Old and New Testament, in a manner to induce us to conclude that it formed a principal part of the food of the Syrian nation. In the 25th chapter of the first book of

Samuel we read, that when Abigail went to meet David, to appease him for the affront given by Nabal her husband, she took with her, amongst other provisions, a present of two hundred cakes of figs.

When Lycurgus banished luxury from Sparta, and obliged the Spartan men to dine in one common hall to enforce the practice of temperance and sobriety, every one was obliged to send thither his provisions monthly, which consisted of about one bushel of flour, eight measures of wine, five pounds of cheese, and two pounds and a half of figs.

The Athenians were so choice of their figs, that it was forbidden to export them out of Attica. Those who gave information of this fruit being sold contrary to law, were called *sykophantai*, from two Greek words signifying the discoverers of figs; and as they sometimes gave malicious information, the term was afterwards applied to all informers, parasites, liars, flatterers, impostors, &c. from whence the word *sycophant* is derived.

The story of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a wolf under a fig-tree, proves that this fruit must have been early known in Italy.

The Egyptians and Greeks held this fruit

in great estimation : it was their custom to carry a basket of figs next to the vessel of wine used in the Dionysia, or festivals in honour of Bacchus ; and it is related to have been the favourite fruit of Cleopatra, who was the most luxurious queen the world ever produced. The asp with which she terminated her life, was conveyed to her in a basket of figs.

Saturn, one of the Roman deities, was represented crowned with new figs ; he being supposed to have first taught the use of agriculture in Italy. There was a temple in Rome dedicated to this god, before which, grew a large fig-tree. The Vestals, when they removed this tree in order to build a chapel on the spot, offered an expiatory sacrifice : this happened about two hundred and sixty years after the foundation of the city.

The fig was a fruit much admired by the Romans, who brought it from most of the countries they conquered, and had so increased the varieties in Italy, by the commencement of the Christian era, that Pliny has furnished us with a description of twenty-nine sorts that were familiar to him. He says, " figs are restorative, and the best food that can be taken by those who are brought low by long sickness, and are on the recovery."

He adds, "that figs increase the strength of young people, preserve the elderly in better health, and make them look younger, and with fewer wrinkles. They are so nutritive, as to cause corpulency and strength : for this cause," continues he, "professed wrestlers and champions were in times past fed with figs." This naturalist mentions the African figs as being admired ; but says, "it is not long since they began to grow figs in Africa." —These appear to have been of an early kind ; for we find when Cato wished to stimulate the senators to declare war against Carthage, he took an early African fig in his hand ; then, addressing the assembly, he said, "I would demand of you how long it is since this fig was gathered from the tree?" and when they all agreed that it was fresh gathered, "Yes," answered Cato, "it is not yet three days since this fig was gathered at Carthage ; and by it, see how near to the walls of our city we have a mortal enemy." With this argument he prevailed upon them to begin the third Punic war, in which Carthage, that had so long been a rival to Rome, was utterly destroyed. "The Lydian figs," says Pliny, "are of a reddish purple colour ; the Rhodian, of a blackish hue ; as is the Tiburtine, which ripens before others.

The white figs were from Herculaneum, Albicerate, and Aratian; the Chelidonian figs are the latest, and ripen against the winter: some bear twice a-year, and some of the Chalcidian kind bear three times a-year." The Romans had figs from Chalcis and Chios, &c.; and many of their varieties, it appears, were named from those who first introduced or cultivated them in Italy. The Livian fig was so named after Livia, wife to the Emperor Augustus, who, it is said, made an unnatural use of it to poison her husband.

If the fig-tree was ever brought to this country by the Romans, it was, in all probability, confined to the southern counties; and not being generally cultivated, was destroyed when their villas were demolished. It is generally supposed that it was not planted in England before the reign of Henry the Eighth, when luxury and the arts began to be encouraged, and noblemen's houses first put on the air of Italian magnificence. There are, at the present time, some fig-trees, of the white Marseilles kind, growing in the garden of the Episcopal Palace, at Lambeth, which are said to have been planted by Cardinal Pole, who brought them from Italy during the reign of Henry the Eighth. There is also a fig-tree of the white sort, at

Mitcham, in the garden of the manor-house, formerly the private estate of Archbishop Cranmer; and it is confidently stated to have been planted by that prelate: the stem measures thirty inches in girth.

At Oxford, in the botanic garden of the Regius Professor of Hebrew, is a fig-tree, which was brought from the East, and planted by Dr. Pocock, in the year 1648. Of this tree, the following anecdote is related: Dr. Kennicott, the celebrated Hebrew scholar and compiler of the Polyglot Bible, was passionately fond of this fruit; and seeing a very fine fig on this tree that he wished to preserve, wrote on a label, "Dr. Kennicott's fig," which he tied to the fruit. An Oxonian wag, who had observed the transaction, watched the fruit daily, and when ripe, gathered it, and exchanged the label for one thus worded: "A fig for Dr. Kennicott."

We may conclude that the fig-trees, which are stated to have been planted in the time of Henry the Eighth, either had not fruited, or were but little known at that period; as Tusser, who has furnished us with a list of the fruits which were grown in England in the succeeding reign, has not mentioned the fig-tree; and Lord Chancellor

Bacon, who wrote still later, never mentions it as being cultivated in England, though, from the exalted situation he filled, and the circles in which he moved, he must have had great opportunities of knowing the earliest introduction of trees and plants, which occupied a part of his attention. The almond, which was not introduced until the days of Elizabeth, is particularly mentioned by him as one of our fruits; but the fig is not in his list. He says, "there be divers fruit trees in the hot countries, which have blossoms and young fruit; and ripe fruit almost all the year, succeeding one another." And it is said, the orange hath the like with us for a great part of summer; and so also hath the fig.

The Hortus Kewensis informs us, that the fig-tree was planted in this country in 1548; and we find, in Turner's Herbal, that the fig-tree was cultivated here previous to 1562. Gerard says, in 1597, that "the fruit of the fig-tree never cometh to maturity with us, except the tree be planted under a hot wall." Parkinson also, in 1629, says, that "if you plant it not against a brick wall, it will not ripen so kindly;" but much must depend on the situation of the country.

There is an orchard of fig-trees at Tarring,

near Worthing, in Sussex, where the fruit grows on standard trees, and ripens as well as in any part of Spain; these trees are so regularly productive, as to form the principal support of a large family. Although the orchard does not exceed three-quarters of an acre, there are upwards of 100 trees, that are about the size of large apple-trees, the branches extending near twenty feet each way from the trunk. Mr. Loud, the proprietor of this little figgery, informs me, that he gathers about 100 dozen per day, during the season, and that he averages the trees to produce him about 20 dozen each: the fruit ripens in August, September, and October, a part of the year when the neighbouring watering places are frequented with fashionable company, that insures a ready sale for this agreeable fruit, at good prices.

The second crop I find has occasionally ripened; the fruit, which, although smaller, is exceedingly sweet, are of the white and purple varieties. Two of these trees are now about seventy-five years old, having been planted in the year 1745 by John Long, who raised them from some old ones in an adjoining garden, near the ruins of the palace of Thomas-à-Becket in that town, who, tradition says, brought these trees from Italy,

and planted them himself. The soil of the garden is a deep black loam on chalk.

The trees are but seldom and sparingly pruned, which I conclude is the cause of their being so prolific, as I have remarked that fig-trees rarely produce much fruit where the knife is regularly used. When they grow too luxuriantly, it has been found better to destroy a part of their roots, and to fill up the space with stones or broken bricks, than to prune the branches too much. Mr. Knight, the president of the Horticultural Society, observes, that there cannot be a more defective manner of cultivating the fig-tree than that which is generally practised by gardeners,—of training them against walls, with their branches perpendicular upwards; the wood, by this means, becomes too luxuriant to produce fruit.

The ancients believed that there existed a sympathy between plants, and they therefore planted rue near their fig-trees, which was said to make the fruit sweeter; and that the rue not only grew more luxuriantly, but more bitter, by being thus neighboured by the fig-tree. I think this is very probable, without having any thing to do with sympathy, as trees and plants will naturally draw juices from the earth most congenial to their

nature: the rue may therefore exhaust the earth of those properties suitable for the nourishment of bitter plants, and leave the fig-tree to thrive from a soil, which the former has qualified, by consuming the particles of the earth that are pernicious to sweet fruits. Shakspeare seems to have been of this opinion when he wrote—

“ And wholesome berries thrive, and ripen best,
Neighbour'd by fruit of baser quality.”

We have now in this country a great variety of this most delicious and wholesome fruit, which is, I believe, the only kind we possess that has sweetness, without acidity or oiliness. It is nourishing, easy of digestion, and grateful to the stomach; and is much esteemed in the countries where it is cultivated: but in England, it seems to please only the refined palates of the higher order of society. In some parts of the coast of Sussex, where this fruit ripens in perfection, I have known it not only neglected by the middle and lower classes, but even mentioned with derision in their disputes.

The fig-tree is distinguished from all other trees we know of, by it's bearing two successive and distinct crops of fruit in one year, each crop being produced on a distinct set

of shoots. This climate rarely allows the second crop to come to maturity, except where they are housed. At the Royal Gardens at Kew, there is a fig-house fifty feet in length, where, under the superintendance of Mr. Aiton, this fruit has been forced to the highest pitch of perfection: Mr. Aiton's chief reliance has been, I understand, on the second crop. In the year 1810, the royal tables were supplied with more than two hundred baskets of figs from that fig-house, fifty baskets of which were from the first crop, and one hundred and fifty baskets from the second. In one instance, Mr. Aiton had this fruit ripe in January, and sent excellent figs to the palace on the late Queen's birthday, the 18th of that month.

The caprification of figs was practised by the ancients in the same manner as it is now attended to by the inhabitants of the Archipelago; and it is described by Theophrastus, Plutarch, Pliny, and other authors of antiquity. It is too curious a circumstance in the history of the fig-tree to be omitted, as it furnishes a convincing proof of the reality of the sexes of plants. The flowers of the fig-tree are situated within the pulpy receptacle; which we call the fruit. Of these receptacles, in the wild fig-

tree, some have male flowers only, and others have male and female.

In the cultivated fig, these are found to contain only female flowers, that are fecundated by means of a kind of gnat bred in the fruit of the wild fig-trees, which pierces that of the cultivated, in order to deposit its eggs within; at the same time diffusing within the receptacle the farina of the male flowers: without this operation, the fruit may ripen, but no effective seeds are produced. Hence it is that we can raise no fig-trees from the fruit of our own gardens, having no wild figs to assist the seed. They are consequently raised by cuttings, or by layers.

In many parts of the Grecian islands, the inhabitants pay such attention to the caprification of the cultivated figs, that they attend daily for three months in the year to gather these little flies from the wild fig-trees, and to place them on the fig-trees in their gardens, by which means they not only get finer fruit, but from ten to twelve times the quantity: thus one of the most minute insects is, by the attention of man, made a principal cultivator of fruit.

It is a curious fact, that fresh-killed venison, or any other animal food, being hung

up in a fig-tree for a single night, will become as tender, and as ready for dressing, as if kept for many days or weeks in the common manner. A gentleman, who lately made the experiment, assured me that a haunch of venison which had lately been killed, was hung up in a fig-tree when the leaves were on, at about ten o'clock in the evening, and was removed before sunrise in the morning, when it was found in a perfect state for cooking; and he adds, that in a few hours more it would have been in a state of putrefaction.

In the neighbourhood of Argenteuil, near Paris, are immense fields covered with fig-trees: the inhabitants of the former town derive their chief support from the culture of this fruit; and I feel confident that there are many situations on the coast of Sussex, between the towns of Arundel and Shoreham, where, if figs were cultivated, the London markets could be amply supplied with this nutritious fruit.

We import the best-dried figs from Turkey, Italy, Spain, and Provence. In the south of France, they are prepared by dipping them in scalding hot lye made of the ashes of the fig-tree, and then dried in the sun.

For medical purposes, figs are chiefly used in emollient cataplasms and pectoral decoctions.

The wood of the fig-tree is of a spongy texture, and, when charged with oil and emery, is much used on the continent by locksmiths, gunsmiths, and other artificers in iron and steel, to polish their work. This wood is considered almost indestructible, and on that account was formerly used in Egypt and other eastern countries, for embalming bodies.

I shall conclude my account of the fig-tree, by the well-known story of Timon of Athens, who was called *misanthrope*, for his aversion to mankind and to all society. He once went into the public place, where his appearance as an orator soon collected a large assembly, when he addressed his countrymen, by informing them, that he had a fig-tree in his garden, on which many of the citizens had ended their lives with a halter; and that, as he was going to cut it down, he advised all those that were inclined to leave the world, to hasten and go hang themselves in his garden.