

Nature's Bountiful Gifts

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Fruits are nature's gift and fruit trees are the gift that keeps on giving. A variety of tropical and subtropical fruit trees can thrive and bear fruit in Coquina Key's micro-climate which is a pocket of tropical climate in the subtropical region of Tampa Bay. The micro-climate is a result of the influence of the island's surrounding bay and gulf waters.

Mangoes are a long time favorite for local residential fruit production. There are several large trees on the island with a few located in front yards. Tree and fruit characteristics include high quality fruit (depending on the variety), high sugar content, ease of maintenance, a dense canopy for shade and high fruit productivity.

Although mango trees can grow quite large up to 100 feet and produce hundreds of pounds of fruit, pruning can limit the height and maintain a low canopy which makes harvesting easier and reduce possible wind damage. Smaller trees called "dwarf" are available. New grafted trees can expect to bear fruit in 3 to 5 years. Because temperatures of less than 28° can damage the trees, our micro-climate is near the northern extent of the viability of the trees.

The popularity of mangoes and mango trees is affirmed in a quote by Rosalie Peck, author of [Petersburg's Historic 22nd Street South](#), in a WUSF radio on-line article, which states "of all the readily accessible food sources of nature, mangoes are most affectionately remembered." With numerous neighborhood trees, the mangoes were ripe for the picking.

Avocado trees are showing more of a presence in residential gardens. Mostly we think of two varieties of avocados—the Hass and the Florida. Hass being medium sized with a dark rough thick skin, while the Florida is larger in size with a smooth green skin. Hass is one variety, of several varieties, that was developed from avocados originally from Guatemala. It was developed in California in 1935. There are several varieties of Florida avocados that are hybrids of avocados originally from Mexico and the West Indies (Central America).

My avocado tree is a Mexicola which is a hybrid of the original Mexican avocado. We planted it about 30 years ago and it has grown to about 30 feet. It has gifted us with thousands of wonderful avocados over the years. The Mexicola is different from both the Hass and Florida avocados. Its flesh is as luscious as the oil rich Hass but has a smooth skin like the Florida. The skin, which is paper thin, starts out green but becomes an elegant black/purple when ripe. The rich flesh, which is a little gooey, makes wonderful guacamole.

A friend of mine in North St. Petersburg planted a Hass tree 4 years ago and last year had two dozen avocados. This year there are about a hundred on the tree. Unfortunately avocados in our climate are not harvested during Cinco de Mayo.

A fine recipe to make use of mangoes and avocados is salsa—dice mangoes and avocados, add minced jalapeño and cilantro to taste, add chopped red onion, add lime juice and salt. Serve with grilled chicken or fish.

Figs, my favorite fruit, have a very high sugar content. Some people dislike the fruit's many little seeds. My tree has been only modestly successful. The hot wet summer weather is a problem for figs. Once figs are ripe they must be picked quickly before they begin to ferment, attract bugs (some of which lay eggs in figs), or are eaten by the black birds. Some figs have a small hole (eye) in the bottom that promotes fermentation and attracts bugs. For figs grown in Florida, the University of Florida has identified beneficial fig characteristics which include cold hardiness, fruiting without pollination, closed eye, long stem to allow the fruit to droop and shed moisture and green skin to reduce damage from birds. Some appropriate fig varieties include Brown Turkey, Celeste, and Hunt.

My solution to the black bird problem came from the [Regional Italian Cooking](#) book by Ada Boni which contains a recipe for Figs in Rum Syrup. The recipe is: pick the under-ripe figs, trim the stem and wash, prepare a sugar syrup (heat equal parts water and sugar), cook figs in the syrup until tender (45 minutes or so), let cool, add rum to taste,

refrigerate for several days. Serve the figs in their syrup and heavy cream.