

## The Sacred Fig (*Ficus religiosa*)

The Bo tree received its name from a Sanskrit word for wisdom. Originating in Southeast Asia, the tree is important in both Buddhism and Hinduism. It is said that the Guatama Buddha achieved “enlightenment” while meditating under this tree. One Bo tree in Sri Lanka was planted in 288 B.C., the oldest verified age for any flowering plant. Throughout Southeast Asia, the tree is a symbol of prosperity and happiness.

Fig trees (*Ficus* species) are in the mulberry family. They grow to great heights and are found throughout the tropics where they require moist warm environments to thrive. Some *Ficus* plants are grown as houseplants with shiny green leaves, but they will quickly drop their leaves if exposed to cold drafts. The rubber tree (*Ficus elastica*), like all members of the mulberry family, produces a milky, latex sap. (But this is not the South American plant, *Hevea brasiliensis* from which we get most natural rubber).

The Bo tree belongs to a group of fig trees known as banyans or strangler figs. They begin to grow as epiphytes in the branches of another tree. Over time, the roots reach the ground, grow into the soil, and form a trunk. Aboveground buttress (prop) roots provide support in windy conditions, an adaptation that has been copied in the building of some cathedrals. Bo tree leaves are heart-shaped with a long tapering tip.

The fruit we call a fig is really the result of a collection of hundreds of flowers inside a structure that is pollinated by tiny fig wasps. Fig wasps can only reproduce in fig flowers. Neither one can survive without the other. A different wasp pollinates each different fig species. The Bo tree has separate male and female plants and produces small, paired, purple figs, which are not edible. The edible fig (*Ficus carica*) contains hundreds of seeds, one from each flower, which crunch in the teeth when eaten. Figs can be eaten fresh, but are commonly dried. If you look carefully in the Tropical Dome, you will find other fig species besides the Bo tree.



Photo courtesy Missouri Botanical Garden PlantFinder