

# Wild figs – rich bounty for man, ape, bird & insect

by Ronelle Kemp

## MORACEAE (Mulberry Family)

This tree family is very large and comprises the well-known cultivated species *Ficus carica*, the common household fig, and several *Morus* species known as mulberries. It is a family of about 73 genera and nearly 3 000 species. Most of them occur from the Tropics southwards throughout the southern hemisphere. They are rather variable in method of growth and in almost all other features, but there is one factor linking them all, namely their milky latex or sap.

### The genus *Ficus*

*Ficus* is the Latin word for a fig, probably originating from the Persian word for a fig, *fica*.

This genus of some 800 species occurs throughout the world.

To our knowledge, Marloth Park boasts only two wild fig species, the large-leaved rock fig, *Ficus abatifolia*,

one of the rock splitters discussed below, and the common cluster fig or *sycamore* fig, which each visitor to the Kruger Park knows as one of the most numerous tree species to be seen along the Park's rivers and in low-lying areas. The economic uses of this tree are numerous: it was used to make sarco-phagi in Ancient Egypt, while the fruits have been valued as a food source since that time in Egypt and elsewhere in Africa. Almost all other parts of this tree, from the roots, bark, latex and wood, to the leaves and fruit, have been used medicinally or as a food or to construct items, by the peoples of Africa.

Unfortunately, Marloth Park lost many fine specimens of this tree during the flood of February 2006, when their root system proved inadequate to offer much resistance to the swirling waters.

All trees of this genus have a milky latex and a pointed stipule (a basal appendage to a leaf frequently enclosing and protecting the developing leaf bud). They are usually deciduous. The most



characteristic feature of the genus is that they all bear a very special "fruit". It actually consists of a flower base markedly enlarged and gnarled, known as a syconium. The base of the "flower" is pulpy and grows out and upwards and then curls towards the inside. The flowers then grow inside the fig. These resemble small truncheons. Most trees of this genus are pollinated by small wasps of the ant family that enter the fig through a small opening to lay their eggs within the syconium. Few attempts are successful, which explains why so few seeds or pips germinate when planted. Those of us who have already tried to eat the fruits of a common cluster fig, which is found in abundance on our river banks, know that they taste quite nice, but that the experience is rather spoiled by the swarms of wasps that are inside. I sense an opportunity for budding young scientists to devise a plan how to make these wasps abandon the fruits. I am sure that there are traditional remedies to solve this problem. Please let us know. The various species rely on different methods to ensure their reproduction. By the same token there are different species of wasps to undertake the task — another reminder to us that we should each make a contribution towards conserving nature. Each of the millions of organisms on earth has a unique relationship with one or more living things which makes it so essential that we protect and nurture this biodiversity. Most of us who have had the privilege to have the common fig in our gardens, know that now and then one or two figs would appear out of season. Their mission is to sustain the population of wasps, so that, when spring arrives, there will be a few individual wasps to start breeding. Then we have the early figs, which help to elevate wasp numbers to the millions needed for the task of



Pictured below is the large-leaved rock fig in Blinkblaar Street, one of the rock splitters. Above are shown the fruit of the common wild fig, a great favourite among purplecrested louries and green pigeons.

pollination when the summer growth of figs reaches maturity.

Some of the wild figs bear small fruits in the axils of the leaves, others bear large figs among the leaves, other fruit appear in pairs or on the major branches or trunk, sometimes in large clusters.

### Stranglers

This group is propagated by seeds. Birds eat the fruit and spread the seed to other trees where they germinate and form long aerial roots stretching down to the ground. When they reach the ground they continue growing like conventional roots and start conveying water and minerals to the young tree. Its growth accelerates and soon the network of roots become intertwined, gradually depriving the host trunk of light for photosynthesis. The host also has to share nourishment and water in the soil with the strangler plant. After many years the host tree reaches a state where it is completely dominated by the strangler and could eventually die. The most common strangler is the common wild fig, *Ficus burkei*, formerly known as *Ficus thonningii*. This tree is a paradise for vervet monkeys, baboons, all fruit-eating birds and bats, elephant, giraffe, kudu, nyala, bushbuck and impala. The larvae of a butterfly species, the *Myrina silenus ficedula*, the common fig-tree blue, live on the leaves of this tree and readers would find it most rewarding to plant one of these trees in the garden in order to attract this beautiful butterfly. The fruits are quite tasty and are used to make beer. The bark provides strong fibre and is used to make ropes and weave mats. The latex of this fig is often tapped to make bird-lime, but it is not recommended in view of the use that is made of it!

### Rock splitters

Wild fig species which have become adapted to growing in rocky terrain have the capacity to penetrate the smallest cracks in their quest for water. As the roots grow and become thicker, massive rocks are sometimes split. However, all these trees do occur in more hospitable conditions as "ordinary trees". Well-known stranglers are the red-leaved fig, *Ficus ingens*, the hairy rock fig, *Ficus glumosa*, and the large-leaved rock fig, *Ficus abutilifolia*, of which a



The common cluster fig or sycamore fig in front of the restaurant at Skukuza.

beautiful specimen can be admired in Blinkblaar Street.

### The wonderboom fig

Near Pretoria grows a remarkable specimen of the *Ficus salicifolia*, which has attained massive proportions by means of aerial roots that have developed to prop up the horizontal branches. The tree has a spread of 53

metres and covers an area of 2 233 sq. metres. Some observers speculate that this tree is more than one thousand years of age. It is, however, an exceptional specimen as it usually grows as a single tree.

(See Afrikaans version below for the medicinal uses of wild figs)

## Wildeveye se ryke oes deur Ronelle Kemp

### MORACEAE (Moerbeifamilie)

Die familie *Moraceae* is baie groot en sluit ou bekendes, soos ons mak vye (*Ficus carica*) en moerbeie (verskeie *Morus* spesies) in. Die familie bestaan uit sowat 73 genera en amper 3 000 spesies. Meeste kom voor vanaf die Trope regdeur die Suidelike Halfrond. Daar is 'n baie groot variasie in die groeiwyse en bykans alle ander eienskappe in die familie, maar die enkele saambindende faktor is die teenwoordigheid van melksap in almal.

#### Genus *Ficus*

Die naam kom vanaf die Latynse woord vir vy, wat waarskynlik op sy beurt sy oorsprong in die Persiese woord vir vy, *fica*, gehad het. Hierdie genus bestaan uit ongeveer 800 spesies. Ons is welbekend met die

verskeie wildeveye van ons omgewing en oorkant die Krokodil. Marloth Park self het net twee wildeveye wat natuurlik binne ons grense voorkom, die Grootblaarrotsvy (*Ficus abutilifolia*) en die Gewone Trosvy (*Ficus sycomorus*). Alle bome van die genus *Ficus* het melksap met kenmerkende stipules (klein steunblaartjies wat aanvanklik die onvolwasse jong blaartjies aan die einde van groeipunte toevou om hulle te beskerm). Die bome is gewoonlik bladwisselend en dan is die mees uitstaande kenmerk van die vye-genus dat hulle almal 'n baie besondere "vrug" dra. Dit bestaan eintlik uit 'n erg vergrote en vergroeiende blombodem, bekend as 'n sikonium. Die basis van die "blom" is baie vlesig en groei uitwaarts en opwaarts en krul dan om na binne, met net 'n baie klein openinkie vir goggatjies om te kan inkom. Die

(Vervolg op bl. 10)

## Wildevye

(Vervolg van bl. 9)

blommetjies ontwikkel dan en sit almal binne-in die vy. Dit is wat vir ons lyk soos klein knuppeltjies binne in die vy. Meeste vye word bestuif deur klein wespe van die mierfamilie wat in die vy inkruip deur die klein openinkie aan die bopunt van die vy. Die suksessyfer is maar laag, dus word baie min blommetjies bevrug. Netso is daar selde baie saadjies of pitjies van 'n vy wat ontkiem as dit geplant word.

Dié van ons wat al probeer het om van die Gewone Trosvy of die Besemtrosvy se vye te eet, sal weet dat dit heel lekker is, maar dat daar hordes wespe binne-in is. Hier is 'n geleentheid vir jong wetenskaplikes om te dink aan planne om te maak dat die goggatjies die vy sal verlaat, sodat ons hulle makliker kan eet. Ek is seker daar bestaan reeds sulke boererate, laat weet asseblief!

Al die verskillende soorte vyebome het verskillende maniere om hulle voortplanting te verseker. Daarom is daar verskillende soorte wespe wat elke boom bestuif, weer eens 'n vermaning aan ons om ons deel te doen vir bewaring. Elkeen van die miljoene soorte organismes op aarde het een of ander unieke verwantskap met ander lewende dinge, daarom is dit noodsaaklik dat ons die biodiversiteit op aarde soos 'n kleinood moet beskerm. Meeste van ons wat die voorreg gehad het om groot te word met mak vye op die werf, het seker al opgelet dat daar soms heel buitenstyd een of twee vye aan die boom gesit het. Die doel van daardie vytjies is om die bevolking van wespe aan die gang te hou, sodat, wanneer die lente kom, daar darem 'n paar individue sal wees om te begin broei. Dan kom die voorvye, wat dan help om die wespe se getalle lekker hoog te kry, sodat daar miljoene beskikbaar is om die bestuifingswerk te doen as die regte groot somerdrag van vye ryp word.

Sommige wildevye dra klein vytjies in die oksels van die blare. Ander dra groot vye wat tussen dié blare gedra word, ander in pare, of op die hoofstamme en takke, soms in groot trosse.

Die groeiwyse van die wildevye verskil ook grootliks tussen spesies en habitate.

## Wurgvye

Hierdie groep vye word algemeen deur

saad versprei. Voëls eet die vrugte en versprei so die saad na ander bome, waar dit ontkiem en lang lugwortels maak af grond toe. By die grond groei hulle soos gewone wortels verder en begin dan om water en minerale na die jong boompie te vervoer. Dié begin dan sterk groei en spoedig verstrengel die netwerk van wortels en word al digter om die gasheerboom se stam.

Geleidelik word die gasheer ontnem van lig vir fotosintese en die wortels moet ook die voedingstowwe en water in die grond deel met die wurgvye. Na vele jare word die gasheer totaal oorheers en word soms "doodgewurg", vandaar die naam.

Die mees algemene wurgvye is die Gewone Wildevy of Wurgvye, *Ficus burkei*, vroeër *Ficus thonningii*. Hierdie boom is 'n lushof vir apies, bobbejane, alle vrugte-etende voëls en vlermuise, olifante, kameelperde, koedoes, njalas, bosbokke en rooibokke. Die larwes van die vyeboomboutjie (*Myrina silenus ficedula*) leef op die blare van die boom. Hierdie is een van ons mooiste skoelappers en dis die moeite werd om een van hierdie bome aan te hou om hierdie sieraad na jou tuin te lok.

Die vrugte is ook vir mense smaaklik en word gebruik om bier te maak. Die bas lewer sterk vesel en is geskik om toue mee te vleg en matjies van te maak. Die hout is nie van 'n goeie gehalte nie, maar word soms gebruik vir ruwe planke om op plase te gebruik. Kinders gebruik die melksap om gom te maak vir voëls.

## Rotsbrekers

Wildevye wat aangepas is om in rotsagtige plekke te groei, het die vermoë om hul wortels in die kleinste krakies in te stuur op soek na water. Soos die wortels groei en dikker word, word massiewe rotse soms gekloof deur 'n eenvoudige boom op soek na water en minerale. Al hierdie bome sal in 'n meer herbergsame habitat as 'n "gewone boom" groei.

Bekende rotsbrekers is die Rooiblaarrotsvy, *Ficus ingens*, die Bergvy, *Ficus glumosa*, en die Grootblaarrotsvy, *Ficus abutilifolia*, waarvan ons 'n pragtige voorbeeld het in Blinkblaarstraat.

## Die Wonderboomvy

Naby Pretoria groei 'n merkwaardige

eksemplaar van *Ficus salicifolia*, wat oor 'n lang tydperk lang afhangeende takke gevorm het wat hier en daar aan die grond raak. Dan skiet hierdie takke wortel en vorm weer 'n "nuwe boom" en so aan. Sommige mense spekuleer dat hierdie proses al omtrent 'n duisend jaar aan die gang is. Vandag beslaan hierdie boom of bome 'n geweldige groot omtrek. Dit is egter 'n uitsonderlike voorbeeld. Gewoonlik groei hierdie bome alleenstaande.

## Moerasvye

Sommige vye is aangepas om in moerasagtige gebiede, met lae suurstofvlakke in die grond, te oorleef. Hulle vorm lang lugwortels vanaf hul takke wat die boom "op stelte" laat groei. 'n Voorbeeld is die Moerasvy, *Ficus trichopoda* van Zoeloeland, met hul pragtige groot, bloedrooi vye.

## Medisinale Vye

Die medisinale waarde van 'n paar plaaslike vye:

**Gewone Wildevy, *Ficus burkei***  
Basafreksel vir verkoue, keelinfeksies, hardlywigheid, stop neusbloeding, stimuleer laktasie vir borsvoeding. Tee van wortels voorkom miskrame. Melksap help vir katarakte.

**Grootblaarrotsvy, *Ficus abutilifolia***  
Basafreksel is 'n tonikum vir manne.

**Rooiblaarrotsvy, *Ficus ingens***  
Basafreksel vir bloedarmoede, verhoog melkproduksie by koeie. Melksap dien as ontsmettingsmiddel, inkrimpmiddel.

**Besemtrosvy *Ficus Sur***  
Basafreksel stimuleer melkproduksie. Poeier van bas neem uitslag weg. Takkies kan aangewend word vir disenterie, melaatsheid, epilepsie, swelsels en vergiftiging. Melksap vir brandwonde, seer oë, septiese konjunktivitis, emetikum. Wortelafreksel vir pynlike menstruasie, keelseer, geswelde bene, diarree, onvrugbaarheid.

**Gewone Trosvy, *Ficus sycomorus***  
Die hout van hierdie boom is in die antieke tydperk in Egipte vir die maak van sarkofae gebruik, as geen medisyne meer wil werk nie!!

Alle dele van die boom, van blare, bas, takkies, regdeur tot by die wortels, word regdeur Afrika hoog aangeslaan vir vele medisinale toepassings, van bors- en klierkwale tot diarree en seerkeel. Die sous van gekookte jong blare is baie voedsaam en word saam met pap geëet. Die Gewone Trosvy is voorwaar een van Afrika se nuttigste bome.