



## Us: To grow and harvest figs here, 'you got to work at it'

'if you want something good'



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With a walk-in forest of choices, why did Adam and Eve clothe themselves with fig leaves?

Was it their size, their durability or those fleshy lobes that offer coverage in all the right places?

All of that, I think, plus this bonus among the leaves: sweet, luscious fruit that normally grows in Western Asia, the Mediterranean and other warm places. But not Western Pennsylvania.

So why are Nicola Mercurio, Concetta Liberto and Italian Americans throughout the region harvesting and eating home-grown figs?

“Because they taste so good,” said Concetta, 85, as she posed next to the nearly 60-year-old fig tree her late husband, Giuseppe, planted first in Larimer, then Highland Park and finally in their backyard in Hampton.



Figs grown beneath the distinctive lobed leaves in Concetta Liberto's garden.  
(Emily Matthews/Post-Gazette)

“When you pick them off the tree, they taste better,” said Nicola, 87, standing amid 25 fig trees in his Bethel Park garden.

Concetta, Nicola and their families won't settle for grocery store figs grown in California. To survive the journey from field to market, those figs are often picked before they're ripe. Growing their own figs is also *assagio* — a

little taste of home. Both were born and raised in the Calabria region of Italy, Concetta in Maierato, Nicola in Falerna.

They are among more than a dozen [local Italian immigrants](#) who share their traditions and knowledge with Mary Menniti, director of [The Italian Garden Project](#). Inspired by her [gardening grandfather](#), she began the project 10 years ago and now is in contact with Italian gardeners all over the country.

“I learn something every time I visit them,” Mary said.

They hold Old World secrets for growing many crops — this was a great year for tomatoes and pole beans — but figs are their specialty.

Fig growing in Italy is much, much easier than it is here. The trees can survive our winters but won't produce fruit unless they're [wrapped like mummies](#) or partially dug up and carefully covered. A vent pipe keeps the branches from rotting. That's how Nicola has done it for nearly 60 years, first at another house in Bethel Park, then at this one. There was no garden when he and his wife, Fenice, moved here in 1962.

Fig trees were some of the first things planted in the sloping backyard, where they stand in rows on both sides and along the back fence. In early August, Nicola sometimes picks [first figs](#), a small early crop of fruit known as *ficazzatta*. This year, he had only a few early figs, and he battled a big crop of bees and wasps to enjoy them.

In his garden of eatin', grapevines wind through a pergola at the top of the slope and a tall fence on one side. Nicola did not harvest many grapes this year — “the fungus got 'em.” But even in a good year, his vines can't produce enough grapes for his winemaking.

“We buy the really good ones from California — Zinfandel, Merlot, Moscato,” he said.



Concetta Liberto and her son, Santo Liberto, next to fig tree her husband planted at their house in Hampton in 1988.

(Emily Matthews/Post-Gazette)

Nicola makes about 45 gallons of wine each year. Some goes to his former co-workers at the Bethel Park maintenance garage. Other bottles are given as gifts. And some are reserved for guests.

“American people say: ‘Do you want a cup of coffee?’” said Fenice, also from Falerna. “We say, ‘Do you want a glass of wine?’”

And sometimes she and her husband say, “Have a fig!”

There is only one fig tree at Concetta’s house in Hampton, but it is ancient. Her husband, Giuseppe, brought it from Italy to Larimer in the 1960s, then dug it up and planted it in this yard in 1988. The garden used to be two-thirds larger, its back border defined by Giuseppe’s compost bins and a pergola made from the poles for highway markers (he worked for PennDOT for almost 40 years). Concetta always worked alongside her husband, and when he died in 2009, she continued.

“She keeps doing it because she likes it,” said her son, Santo, who lives in Indiana Township.

“My brother Domenic and I dig up the garden, but she plants everything. She weeds and waters it. She will be 85.”

In addition to figs, Concetta grows pole beans, Swiss chard, zucchini, eggplant, peppers, tomatoes and rapini, a small leafy vegetable similar to broccoli.

Giuseppe Liberto's sons dig up and bury the fig tree in late October or early November and uncover it in March or April as their father taught them to. They have small vegetable gardens at their homes but consider this the family garden. They and their children each have shoots from what they call "the mother tree." The tiny fig trees grow in pots and are kept inside in winter. They bear a few figs, but not like the ones on the mother tree tended by Concetta.

"Every morning I come out and do a little," said the smiling little woman with bright blue eyes.

When I noticed pumpkin vines, I asked Concetta if she got many pumpkins for Halloween. She shook her head.

"She grows them for the flowers and leaves," said her granddaughter, Danielle Desko.

Concetta nodded, explaining how she cooks the pumpkin leaves in a little olive oil to make a dish Italians call cimi. She makes fritters from the flowers.

These are the Old World traditions The Italian Garden Project aims to preserve, Mary says. On the day we visited, she spent 10 minutes learning from Fenice Mercurio how to save and preserve pole beans and peppers. A tiny woman whose cataracts prevent her from working alongside her husband in the rows, Fenice explained why these 80-somethings work so hard to harvest figs and other crops in their gardens.

"If you want something good, you got to work at it."

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