




## While growing figs is hard, for those who do the harvest is that much sweeter



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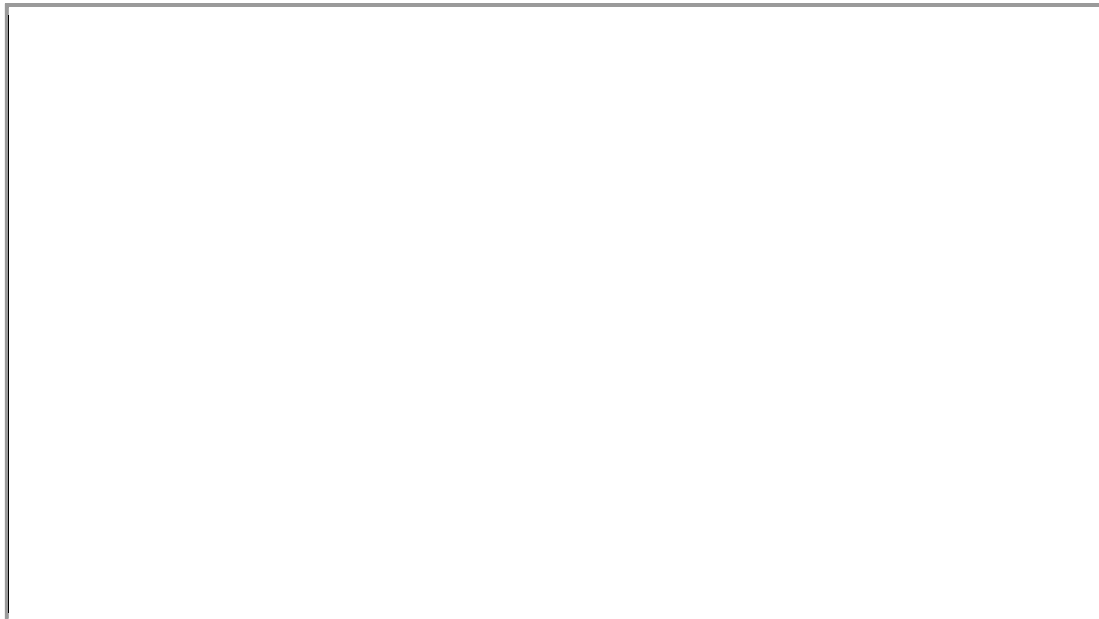
AUG 16, 2014

12:00 AM

After a brutal winter that killed some of his friends' trees, Saverio Strati has a bigger crop of first figs than ever.

"I don't know why. I'm surprised myself," said the 84-year-old Hazelwood man who tends four fig trees on land near his home.

Only the oldest one, a white fig tree given to him by a friend more than 30 years ago, produces ficazzatta, the Italian word for the small early crop of fruit that ripen on some trees in late July or early August. Mr. Strati will harvest about a dozen figs on a small piece of land near the old J&L Steel millsite, where Italian immigrants have been growing fruit and vegetables since the Great Depression.



Tommasina Floro and her husband, Tomasso, were not as lucky as Mr. Strati. Several of the half-dozen fig trees in their Sewickley backyard died back to the ground this winter even though they had wrapped them to ward off the cold.

In Falerna, the town in Italy's Calabria region where the Floros and Mr. Strati were born, fig trees grow tall and easy and produce an abundant crop. But in western Pennsylvania, growing figs is hard and for these Italian immigrants, the harvest is that much sweeter.

"They remind us where we come from," Mrs. Floro said.

This summer, the cold wasn't her enemy as she picked a smaller but slightly earlier crop of first figs than Mr. Strati. It was the birds, specifically two cardinals.

"They just want the seeds," her husband complained.

To protect the ripening fruit, he draped netting over the small trees on which large green first figs hung next to smaller ones that will ripen in September. His wife had tried a different approach, wrapping individual figs with scraps of cloth to hide them.

Neither tiny shawls nor aluminum pans that spin and bang together in the breeze were enough to save every fig. But Mrs. Floro still found a couple to share with a reporter and photographer on a recent rainy day. Their natural sweetness put Fig Newtons to shame.

Hanging nearby were beautiful braids of drying garlic and a kiwi tree filled with fruit. Six rain barrels were overflowing, more than enough to water the tomatoes, green beans, persimmons, Concord grapes and other crops in the small yard.

Mary Menniti created the Italian Garden Project ([www.theitaliangardenproject.com](http://www.theitaliangardenproject.com)) to draw upon and preserve the centuries of garden know-how that the Floros, Mr. Strati and other Italian immigrants embody. Throughout the year, she offers programs on growing figs and other crops the traditional, sustainable way.

On Friday, from 6 to 9 p.m., she'll hold an annual Alfresco Italian Garden Dinner at the Fern Hollow Nature Center in Sewickley Heights. Tickets are \$75 for Fern Hollow members, \$100 for others and proceeds benefit Fern Hollow's educational programs. Reservations are required by calling 412-741-6136 or emailing [fhnc@verizon.net](mailto:fhnc@verizon.net).

Ms. Menniti also helps organize Sewick's Chicks, a tour of backyard chicken coops in the Sewickley Valley scheduled for 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Aug. 31. Tickets are \$10 for adults, free for children ages 8 and under and available at the tour's starting point, the Penguin Bookshop, 417 Beaver St., Sewickley (15143).

For the last five years, she has worked to spread the knowledge that she first glimpsed as a child in New Castle, trailing her Italian immigrant grandfather in the family garden. In September and October, Ms. Menniti will give fig growing classes in New York City and Washington, D.C., respectively. She said Americans are rediscovering the garden tricks and traditions that their grandparents and great-grandparents carried with them from the old country, and adapted to their new one.

"This has historic importance," she said, looking around the Floros' modest garden. "Immigrants up and down the East Coast planted figs and they really know how to garden."

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*First Published August 16, 2014, 12:00am*