



The Moreton Bay and Port Jackson Fig Trees

(Bird) Plant of the Month

(ASNSW Meeting - May 2012)

By Janet Macpherson

Moreton Bay Fig (*Ficus macrophylla*)



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Both the Moreton Bay (*Ficus macrophylla*) and the Port Jackson (*Ficus rubiginosa*) are rainforest trees which are native to the eastern coast of Australia. We have one of each of these trees growing in our garden at present. The first, the Moreton Bay Fig, was germinated from the seeds from the mature Moreton Bay Fig trees growing in Hyde Park in the city of Sydney. I picked up the fruit from under the trees over 35 years ago now. I initially managed to cultivate two trees from this seed. However, I kept the trees in pots too long and ended up with just the one. Living on acreage I planted the tree down on a lower slope in the garden where it still stands today not yet fully grown. I was thinking at the time that I planted it that it would live and grow untouched for at least as long as I live here and hopefully for many years following. We are all aware of just how long most trees will live in the right conditions and thought this tree too had the opportunity to live and grow and provide shelter and food for our native birds for a very long time. I am now uncertain of its longevity however, as neighbours of more recent years have put in a large water storage facility not too far from where the tree stands. I pointed out to them that the tree was a Moreton Bay Fig when I noticed they had suddenly started excavating for the tanks without giving us any prior warning. Their only response was that they knew that and that they liked the Moreton Bays. The Moreton Bay Fig is however a type of strangler fig and when the seed germinates in the tops of the trees in the rainforest situation it is capable of growing and sending its roots down to the base of the tree, surrounding it and eventually killing the host tree. Stand alone trees, such as the one I have planted, although they do not grow as tall as they would in a rainforest situation, develop a very large buttress root system which can be very invasive of water systems; they are definitely not a tree for a small garden for this reason. They develop a large canopy in this stand alone situation and can grow into a very beautiful tree indeed.

There was a magnificent example of a fully grown Moreton Bay Fig, a standalone tree, that I remember seeing on a number of occasions when travelling with my mother and father and sisters to Melbourne on the old Hume Highway as a child. The tree stood on a hill to the left of the highway at the top of the Razorback range between Camden and Picton south west of Sydney on the old Hume Highway¹. It was known as the Anthony Hordens' Tree (owned by Anthony Horden and Sons which was a big department store in the heart of Sydney at the time). It had a big sign in front of the tree a couple of feet high which stretched from one side of the canopy to the other. It read "While I Live I grow" and was an icon for many years. Then a stupid act of vandalism struck and the tree was found to be dying. It had been deeply ringbarked and was not noticed until the tree started showing the signs of this act. Arborists and a tree surgeon were called in by

Anthony Hordens to try and save the tree and I remember seeing it some years later, alive only on the one side, with a solitary branch that went off to the right with the rest of the tree branches dead. It was a sad reminder of its former glory. The sign stayed for a while but was later removed.

Port Jackson Fig (*Ficus rubiginosa*)



Port Jackson Fig (*Ficus rubiginosa*)

The Port Jackson Fig that we have in our garden is self sown by the birds. We sit on a rock face and I initially noticed the little seedling growing on the ledge about 20 or so years ago in amongst a little tuft of moss. I initially thought that because of its position behind the house I would keep it there as a bonsai and so regularly trimmed the little tree and its roots. They are suitable trees for bonsai having a much smaller leaf than the Moreton Bay. They also have a rusty colour on the underside of the leaf and their root system being similar to the Moreton Bay makes it a very attractive medium sized bonsai when mature. However the "best laid plans of mice and men" and over the years and the busyness of working and raising a family meant that the little tree was a bit neglected. The small bonsai became a medium and later a large bonsai. Then in 1993 my husband contracted encephalitis (it was thought from mosquitoes) and this triggered a condition known as Guillian Barre Syndrome. It left him paralysed for many months and he suffered residual damage which will be with him for the rest of his life. Our Port Jackson bonsai was left to its own devices after this and by its very nature it started doing what Port Jackson Figs do and slowly crept its roots down the rock face. It also sent down aerial roots from the branches until its root system reached the good soil. The rest is history. The tree is now very healthy and whilst its roots can never do any damage to the house, the side of the tree closest to the house off the timber deck, will need to be trimmed back from time to time. It should be noted here that another good reason for keeping the tree, apart from the many birds that it feeds and shelters, is that these rainforest trees are fire-retardants and for those that live in bushfire prone areas and have the space for such a tree, it is something that should be considered. An extract from an article by [The Small Tree Farm](#) (a small family farm of 40 hectares (100 acres) at Balingup 230 kms south of Perth in the south west of Western Australia) entitled "[Planting Trees for Living Firebreaks](#)" states that, "The use of fire-retardant trees to landscape around the homestead can significantly increase the safety of buildings in the case of a wild fire event."

Both the Moreton Bay and Port Jackson Fig Trees require the help of the [Fig Wasp](#) (*Pleistodontes imperialis*) for pollination and likewise the Fig Wasp relies on the Figs for their survival and lifecycle. Following pollination, the small rounded fruits develop along the new growth of the branches and are attractive to a number of different birds and also to the [Fruit Bats \(Flying Foxes\)](#), which then play their part in helping the tree to disperse its seeds.

We have had a few bumper crops of figs from the Port Jackson Fig over the past years and have observed a number of different birds that feed in the tree from time to time. The [Wonga Pigeons](#) (*Leucosarcia melanoleuca*) pay regular visits to the trees whilst fruiting (which is more a less an ongoing process throughout the year), as also are the [Pied Currawongs](#) (*Strepera graculina*), [Green Cat Birds](#) (*Ailuroedus crassirostris*) and [Satin Bowerbirds](#) (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*). This last year during the early months of the year we also had the migratory species, the [Pacific Koel](#) (*Eudynamys orientalis*), find and relish the fruit on the tree for the first time. There was one mature female and later I observed a mature cock. An immature cock coming into colour also frequented the tree. I have also observed the [Eastern Whipbirds](#) (*Psophodes olivaceus*) darting in and around the branches and fruit but having not observed them actually

eating the fruit, I am assuming they may only be looking for insects that the fruit attracts. If any readers of this article know otherwise, I would be interested to hear from you and will add your comments accordingly. The Fruit Bats have not yet found the tree although there was a time that they too were regular visitors when the [Old Man Banksias](#) (*Banksia Serrata*) grew along the same rock ledge. Unfortunately a lot of these trees which grew all along the ridges of the valley behind us died during the long drought that we had in the late 80s early 90s. We managed to save two of the trees which grew closer to a water course and therefore picked up any water that was available even though spasmodic. We also tried to keep them alive with the occasional watering. All of the old trees on the adjoining blocks were lost.

Another night feeder that sometimes lies along the ledge in the summer's sun in the shade of this tree is a large [Diamond Python](#) (*Morelia spilota spilota*). It has been a resident for many years and now measures over 10 feet in length. We sometimes see [native bush rats](#) (*Rattus fuscipes*) along the ledge at night. I am not sure if they also feed on the figs but it is pretty certain that the python feeds on them whenever the opportunity arises. I once saw this python stretched out through the branches of the tree during the day having been drawn to its presence by the loud warnings being issued to the other birds by a group of native [Noisy Miners](#) (*Manorina melanocephala*). The [Magpie-larks](#) (*Grallina cyanoleuca*), or Peewees as they are called here in New South Wales, soon arrived to join in the chorus. If the python was lying in wait for an unsuspecting bird, it had now lost any chance of this happening. I have noticed over many years that the Noisy Miner is always the first to raise an alarm when a threat of any kind enters the garden, whether it is in the form of a hawk in the skies overhead, or from something in the trees or undergrowth. I have also observed that the other birds always take notice of these warnings by immediately heading for cover, or in the case of the more aggressive species, joining in the fight to drive off an intruder.



Left: Diamond Python (*Morelia spilota spilota*)
Right: Australian Native Bush Rat (*Rattus fuscipes*) ([Courtesy Wikipedia](#))

From my research on the internet and on Wikipedia in particular, I note that among other birds that feed on the fruit of these trees are the [Rose-crowned](#) (*Ptilinopus regina*) and [Wompoo Fruit-doves](#) (*Ptilinopus magnificus*), [Topknot Pigeon](#) (*Lopholaimus antarcticus*), [Australasian Figbird](#) (*Sphecotheres vieilloti*), the [Fig Parrots](#) (*Cyclopsittini*) and the [Regent Bowerbird](#) (*Sericulus chrysocephalus*). Although we have a number of other species of birds that visit the garden such as the [Rainbow Lorikeets](#) (*Trichoglossus haematodus*), [King Parrots](#) (*Alisterus scapularis*), [Crimson](#) (*Platycercus elegans*) and [Eastern Rosellas](#)² (*Platycercus eximius*) and some of the larger parrots such as the [Yellow-tailed Black](#) (*Calyptorhynchus funereus*) and [Sulphur-crested](#) (*Cacatua galerita*) Cockatoos, [Galahs](#) (*Eolophus roseicapilla*) and occasional visits from the [Gang Gangs](#) (*Callocephalon fimbriatum*); I have never observed any of these birds feeding on the figs. I have offered the fruits to my [Little Corella](#) (*Cacatua sanguinea*), a rescue bird and a onetime feather plucker in my care, and he has thrown them down or back at me, seemingly in disgust that I should even offer him such a thing! He is a little bit odd however, as I have also offered him the seeds of the [London Plane tree](#) (genus *Platanus*) after observing Little Corellas feeding on them. He treated the London Plane tree seeds in the same way as he did the figs.

I did a web search for the nutritional value of the fruits of the Moreton Bay and Port Jackson figs but the only information that I could come up with which related to the *Ficus* in general was that of the [Common Fig as recorded on the Wikipedia website](#) which states that: "Figs are one of the highest plant sources of [calcium](#) and fiber. According to USDA data for the Mission variety, dried figs are richest in fiber, copper, manganese, magnesium, potassium, calcium, and vitamin K, relative to human needs. They have smaller amounts of many other nutrients. Figs have a laxative effect and contain many antioxidants. They are good

source of [flavonoids](#) and polyphenols including [gallic acid](#), [chlorogenic acid](#), [syringic acid](#), [\(+\)-catechin](#), [\(-\)-epicatechin](#) and [rutin](#). In one study, a 40-gram portion of dried figs (two medium size figs) produced a significant increase in plasma antioxidant capacity."

One other bit of trivia that I came across, although not relevant to the nutritional value of either the Moreton Bay or Port Jackson Figs, was a question on [DogForum.com.au](#) which reads as follows:

"MORETON BAY FIGS - BAD FOR DOGS???"

QUESTON: Hi, I have 2 beautiful Whippets who are just OBSESSED with Moreton bay Figs and eat them like they are liver treats scattered on the ground!!! (There are several trees on our daily walk that drop them) The younger one who is 5 months doesn't seem to have an upset digestive system as a result but my older boy (15 months) I've noticed that after about poop number 3 on a walk it becomes very runny and today he had a vomit. In the vomit was his raw chicken thigh from breakky and those silly Moreton Bay Figs and stalks!!! Does anyone know if the "figs" are bad for dogs? Their diet (other than the figs) is raw chicken thigh, science diet biscuits, raw bones and the occasional carrot or vege to chew on. They are definitely the only dogs who eat them at the park and people always comment at how strange it is that they eat them so furiously or even at all! I can't find any info about the effects of them and wonder if I should try (it would be very tricky) to stop them eating them?

ANSWER: To my knowledge Moreton Bay figs are not dangerous to a dog whatsoever. The danger usually lies in how many they eat. In small doses most dogs are usually okay, but if they get a good stash, then yeah, carpet cleaner and bucket needs to come out! Like anything, too many and they'll be sick, but it's not usually the fig at fault, it's the amount. Lol."

Both the Moreton Bay and Port Jackson Figs, along with other varieties of native Australian Fig trees are now grown in a number of warm temperate regions throughout the world. There are many beautiful examples of these trees in Hawaii and the warmer states of the mainland USA and also in Italy to name just a few of the countries where they now grow as an introduced species. If you keep any of the birds mentioned, spare a thought for your feathered friends next time you take a walk under a Moreton Bay or Port Jackson Fig tree in fruit and bring some of these fruits home for your birds. When ripe the fruits will drop freely from the trees and are often seen in abundance on the ground.

¹ *Thank you to John Coughlan who emailed us with the location of Anthony Horden's Moreton Bay Fig tree (While I Live I Grow). Originally this article only had an approximate location as "on a hill to the left of the highway somewhere in the vicinity of Goulburn on the Hume Highway".*

² *December 2013 (update by Janet Macpherson). I previously stated that I have never observed the Eastern Rosella eating the figs in the Port Jackson Fig tree behind the house. However this year a pair of Eastern Rosellas with one young fledgling in tow, regularly visited the tree over several days and were clearly seen to be feeding on the ripened figs.*

The Koels were also back in full force this time and greedily consumed as many figs as they could in competition with the Satin Bowerbirds and other birds that visited the tree this year. There was another bird new to the tree although I have not yet been able to identify it. It was of Bower Bird appearance although much smaller. Its plumage was a sort of brown and creamy white striated pattern on its wings and back cream or white breast with the same striated pattern although predominately white with thinner brown stripes than on the wings. It was a very shy bird and it was hard to see clearly for very long as it would come and go again very quickly if other birds entered the tree at the same time. I saw that it was definitely feeding on the figs.

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