

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

The Strangler Fig is a native to South Florida, the subtropics and tropics. It is a member of the Mulberry family. Strangler Figs flower almost continuously, producing small, spherical "fruits" which are eaten by birds. The birds then spread the seeds in their droppings. The seeds are sticky and may attach to a tree—often a cabbage palm such as the photo to the right—the green vine-like plant against the cabbage palm trunk is a young Strangler Fig. This particular Strangler Fig is only about a foot tall and is actually about 15 feet above the ground—you can see its tiny roots grasping the cabbage palm and heading to the ground. Look for this one in the Cabbage Palm near the flag pole at Barefoot Beach Preserve, as you head toward the Park Ranger's office. Occasionally, seeds are dropped directly on the ground and grow as an individual tree. The tree provides habitat, food, and shelter for a host of wildlife. It is the larval host plant for ruddy daggerwing butterflies.

Strangler Fig (*Ficus aurea*)

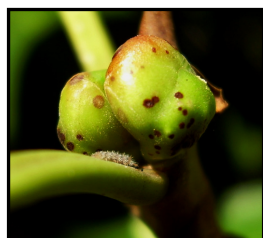


The fast-growing Strangler Fig can get over 60 feet tall and sends down aerial roots wrapped around its host, ultimately reaching the ground and may even engulf the host tree. It thrives in full sun, has a high drought tolerance, and will endure brackish water or occasional inundation by salt water. It has a very low tolerance for cold. As the roots enlarge, the Strangler Fig becomes self-supporting. In the tropics, the host tree may eventually be killed by shading from the profuse branches and leaves that rise above the host. In the end, the Strangler Fig becomes a tree itself as the host tree decomposes within the embrace of the strangler's roots. Thus is derived its common name of Strangler Fig. **However**, being in the subtropics where occasional freezes kill back the Strangler Fig, they usually do not strangle or overtake trees in areas such as ours.

The simple, oval, alternate leaves shown in the photo to the right are a shiny dark green that are thick and leathery, about 4" long and 2" wide. Broken twigs exude a milky, sap that may cause a skin reaction in some people. The "fruits" occur in leaf axils near branch tips and turn from greenish-yellow to dark red when



ripe, as shown in the photo to the below right. They are about a half-inch in diameter and are actually hollow, globular receptacles, each with hundreds of small fleshy flowers facing each other on the inside. They are pollinated by a tiny specialized wasp that



enters the receptacle through a small opening. Each flower inside the receptacle then produces a tiny fruit containing seeds. The fruits are edible but you have to chew them a long time before you are comfortable to swallow them. A related Mexican name is *chicle de monte*, meaning *gum bush*. Is this where the name for Chiclets chewing gum came from? It is said that Native tribes made a poultice from the inner bark for treating sores and cuts. Reports imply usage of the aerial roots for making lashings, arrows, and fishing lines. Native peoples also used the milky sap (latex) as paint.

Among several nonnative figs in the genus of *Ficus*, there are only two natives inhabiting South Florida and the Keys: *Ficus aurea* and *Ficus citrifolia*. The Florida native *Ficus citrifolia* is known as the Shortleaf Fig. Although similar in appearance to the Strangler Fig, its fruits are on the end of relatively long stalks, unlike the sessile fruits of the Strangler Fig. The Shortleaf Fig is not as common as the Strangler but is usually found in similar habitats. Only *Ficus aurea* has been verified to be at Barefoot Beach Preserve.