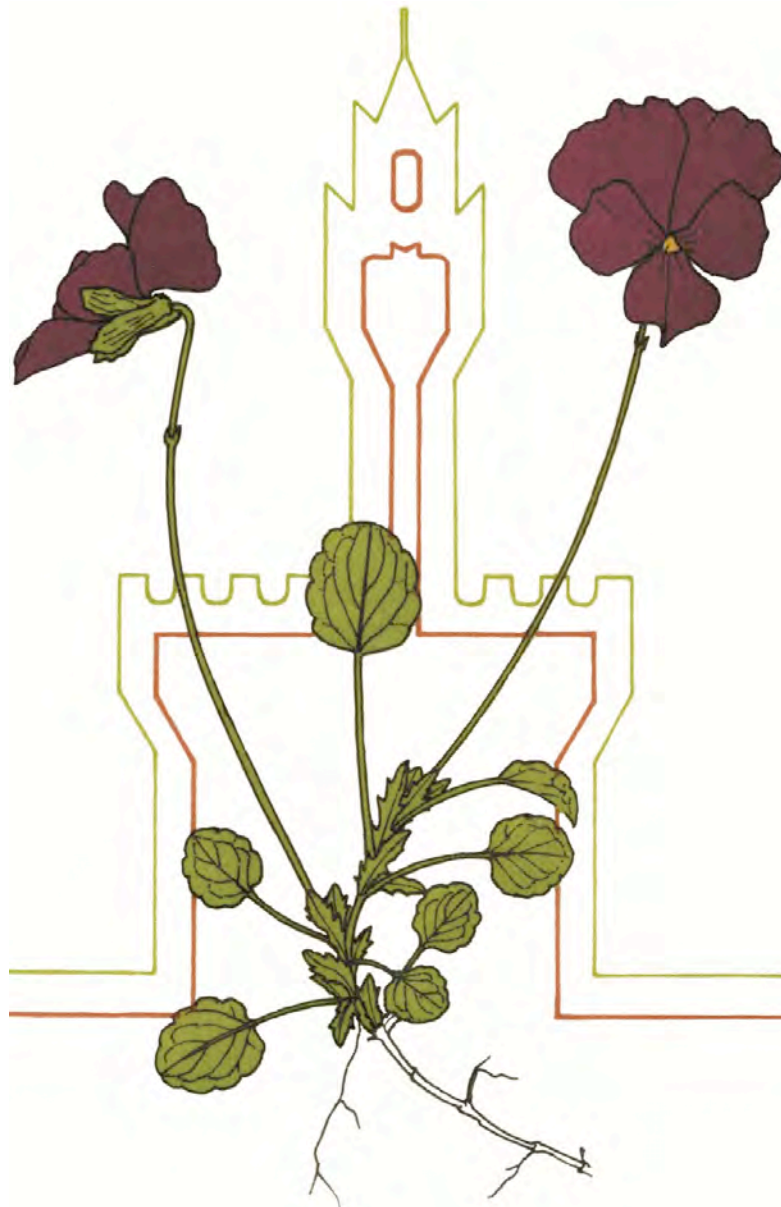


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4.6 = THE PALERMO BOTANICAL GARDEN'S *FICUS* GENUS (MORACEAE) COLLECTIONGIUSEPPE BAZAN¹, MANLIO SPECIALE², PIETRO MAZZOLA¹¹Department of Agricultural and Forest Sciences, University of Palermo, Italy; ²Orto Botanico, University of Palermo, Italy

Figs could very well be considered the symbolic plants of the Palermo Botanical Garden as well as of the City itself. With their exuberant growth, over time these trees have become identifying elements of Sicilian Historic Gardens, giving them a strong tropical connotation. An extraordinary example of this can be seen in the *Ficus macrophylla* subsp. *columnaris* of the Norman Palace that clutches a much older historic specimen of *Pinus pinea* in its buttress and aerial roots: the exotic element declares its supremacy over the Mediterranean one and prevails. In fact, it would be that uncontrollable Romantic spirit that would dominate the late Baroque illuminist formalism during the Eighteen hundreds; here we see *Sturm und drang* in full action.

The Palermo Botanical Garden had a central role in the introduction, acclimation, and diffusion of the various species of the *Ficus* genus present in the ornamental flora of Mediterranean Italy. The Royal Botanical Garden Bulletins (*Bollettini del Regio Orto botanico di Palermo*) give us a detailed retelling of the introduction of the different species that are now present in the collection (1, 2, 4).

The activity centered on the introduction and cultivation of various species of *Ficus* in the Garden at the end of the XIX century was also motivated by the quest for a possible source of rubber derived from the latex in these trees, even if chemical studies of the latex of the *Ficus* species cultivated in Sicily reveal the presence of a small amount of elastic rubber (3).

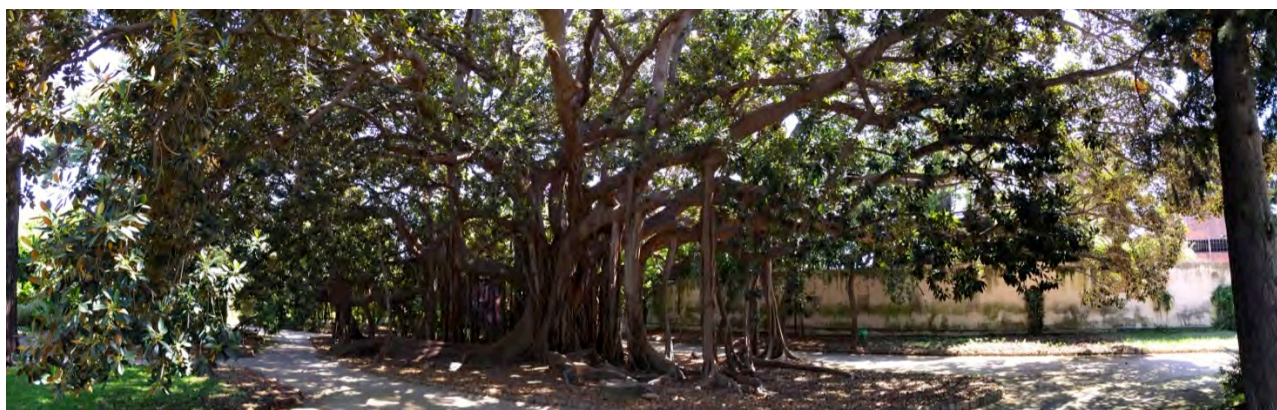
Currently, *Ficus* collection of Palermo Botanical Garden includes 133 plants belonging to 48 *taxa*, of which 44 species, 1 subspecies, 3 variety and 18 plants that are still taxonomically unidentified. 57 of these are planted in the ground, while the remaining 76 are in pots.

Ficus watkinsiana, *F. macrophylla* subsp. *columnaris* and *F. microcarpa* are the most abundant species in the collection with respectively 14, 10, and 9 specimens.

The most relevant *taxa* planted in the ground, aside from the immense *Ficus macrophylla* subsp. *columnaris* are: *F. benghalensis* and *F. religiosa*, two trees that are sacred in the Buddhist and Hindu religions; *F. sycomorus*, tree cited in the Old Testament; *F. rubiginosa*, which forms a real jungle, an admirable *F. altissima*; but also *F. watkinsiana*, *F. aspera* var. *parcelli*, *F. magnifolia* and *F. bibracteata*.

Many other *taxa* are present: *F. erecta*, *F. virens*, *F. microcarpa*, *F. indica*, *F. longifolia*, *F. pumila*, *F. umbonata*, *F. aurea*, *F. baileyana*, *F. citrifolia*, *F. gigantea*, *F. habrophylla*, *F. populifolia*, *F. bracteata*, *F. cordata* subsp. *salicifolia*, *F. deltoidea*, *F. frigida*, *F. heterophylla*, *F. hispida*, *F. lutea*, *F. lyrata*, *F. morifolia*, *F. natalensis* subsp. *leprieurii*, *F. palmata*, *F. sur*, *F. theophrastoides*, *F. cyathistipula* and *F. carica*.

Taken as a whole, and considering its monumentality, the *Ficus* collection in the Botanical Garden of Palermo University can certainly be counted amongst the richest and most significant ones present in open air in European botanical institutions.



- 1) A. Borzi (1897) Bollettino del Regio Orto Botanico di Palermo, 1(2), 43-50
- 2) A. Borzi (1897) Bollettino del Regio Orto Botanico di Palermo, 1(3-4), 156-161
- 3) A. Borzi (1905) Bollettino del Regio Orto Botanico di Palermo, 4(2-3), 59-79
- 4) A. Borzi (1905) Bollettino del Regio Orto Botanico di Palermo, 4(2-3), 105-111
- 5) S. Fici, F.M. Raimondo (1996) Curtis's Botanical Magazine, 13(2), 105-107