



Gods, Wasps and Stranglers

The Secret History and Redemptive Future of Fig Trees

Mike Shanahan

\$22.50 • Hardcover

5 1/2 × 8 1/2 • 208 pages

Black-and-white illustrations throughout

ISBN 978-1-60358-714-3

Pub Date: November 8, 2016

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“As our planet’s climate changes and reminds us that nature really does matter, the story [of fig trees] has important lessons for us all.”

—MIKE SHANAHAN

Fig trees are awesome. They have been around for 80 million years and during that time they have shaped our world and impacted humanity in profound but little-known ways. In his new book, *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers*—recently featured in *The New Yorker*—journalist and researcher Mike Shanahan reveals the captivating story of fig trees and how they can offer our planet hope for the future.

Here are 10 Fascinating Fig Facts to pique your interest:

1. There are over 750 known *Ficus* species in the world, mostly found in the tropics and subtropics.
2. Each species of fig tree is pollinated by its own distinct species of fig wasp, a fascinating example of coevolution.
3. Although the average female fig wasp is less than two millimeters long, she must often travel tens of kilometers in less than 48 hours to lay her eggs in another fig—a truly heroic journey!
4. Fig trees are keystone species in many rainforests, producing fruit year round that are important food sources for more than 1,200 animal species from bats to monkeys to birds.
5. Fig tree flowers are actually hidden *inside* the fruit, which led some cultures to believe the plants to be flowerless.
6. Figs have played prominent roles in every major modern religion, including Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism.
7. Some fig species are trees, others are climbers, shrubs, and even epiphytes and tree stranglers.
8. Female rhinoceros hornbills are sealed into the hollow trunks of trees to brood by their male partners, who also deliver them figs to eat through narrow crevices.
9. Strangler figs grow their roots downward from the tops of their host trees ultimately smothering and replacing them.
10. A banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*) can resemble a small forest thanks to the false trunks grown from its aerial prop roots. The largest one on record is growing in India and spans over four acres.



Mike Shanahan is a freelance writer with a doctorate in rainforest ecology. He has lived in a national park in Borneo, bred endangered penguins, investigated illegal bear farms, produced award-winning journalism and spent several weeks of his life at the annual United Nations climate change negotiations. His writing includes work published by *The Economist*, *Nature*, *The Ecologist* and *Ensia*, among others. He maintains a blog called *Under the Banyan*.

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