

Figs

Curtain fig / *Ficus microcarpa* / Gajumaru / ガジュマル

The curtain fig grows mostly in tropical regions from southern Japan to Australia and India. On Amami-Oshima it is found in humid locations from coastal areas to mountain forests—where it can grow on rock walls or on the tops of other trees. It is easily recognized by its numerous aerial roots, which reach down to the ground from both the trunk and branches. Its tendency to grow down around a host tree, depriving it of nutrients and gradually choking it to death, marks it as a variety of “strangler fig.” The dark-green oval leaves are about 5 centimeters long. As with all figs, its flowers bloom inside the seed pod, which later matures into the flower sac that we know as a fig. Also like other figs, the tree needs the cooperation of fig wasps to pollinate, as the wasps enter the flower sacs to lay their eggs.

The spirit of the forest

According to Amami-Oshima legend, curtain figs and sea figs are home to the *kenmun*, one of the mythical Japanese creatures collectively known as *yokai*. This creature is said to be covered in reddish fur, though it can change its appearance. Some believe the *kenmun* protects the trees. Legend has it that it is usually not dangerous to humans, but it is a prankster capable of mischief.

Sea fig / *Ficus superba* / Ako / アコウ

The sea fig is found in most subtropical and tropical parts of Asia, where it can live to an age of several hundred years. It often grows from the top of a host tree, where wild animals have deposited the seeds, and its whiskery aerial roots run down the trunk, sometimes covering the entire trunk as it ages. It belongs to a category of figs known as “strangler figs” for their tendency to grow down around a host tree, depriving it of nutrients and gradually choking it to death. It is similar to the curtain fig, but can be distinguished by its leaves, which are twice as long and twice as wide, as well as by its fruit (actually a flower sac), which grows directly from the trunk and branches. The flowers bloom around August, with female flowers growing on female trees and male flowers on male trees. Though the sea fig is an evergreen, it can be mistaken for a deciduous tree because it sheds its leaves all at once and immediately grows new ones. On Amami-Oshima it is sometimes cultivated to form windbreaks or hedges, though its large canopy requires plenty of space. Like the curtain fig, the sea fig is home to the *kenmun*, a legendary prankster figure in Amami-Oshima folklore.