

Fruit – Sustaining Life  
in the Forest

MARIAM JUTTA



Fruit are very important for the survival of animals. In Malaysian forests members of the mulberry family or Moraceae play a crucial role as year-round food sources. Prominent are *Ficus* (figs) and *Artocarpus* (e.g. cempedak, terap), with about 100 and 20 species respectively. Despite a milky, often irritant sap most have edible, usually pulpy or juicy fruit, and many are common species in our forests. Most are “pioneer species”, i.e. among the first species to establish in a disturbed area, e.g. a gap in the canopy due to an old tree toppling over or after a landslide.

Their seeds quickly germinate and grow, helping to close back the canopy, and protecting the soil from erosion, while more sensitive forest trees can germinate and grow beneath their shade. Most members of the Moraceae, especially *Ficus*, will produce fruit regularly and plentiful, from a young age.

Many forest animals depend on figs and wild *Artocarpus* for their survival. Even the diet of an Orang Utan consists of 25% figs. Animals eating wild figs, terap and cempedak also help to disperse the seeds to new areas. This assists in maintaining a healthy genetic diversity among populations of these plant species.

