



***Ficus carica*: Growing an Edible Fig Tree**

The fig is probably one of the world's oldest cultivated fruits, native to an area that stretches from Afghanistan to Portugal. Fig trees are easy to grow and will produce luscious fruit abundantly for years. The common fig - *Ficus carica* - is grown in the United States because the fruits are parthenocarpic, which means they do not need a wasp pollinizer. 'Brown Turkey' and 'Chicago Hardy' are two cultivars that are root-hardy in St. Louis and can be grown as a multi-stemmed shrub in a sheltered area of the garden or as a tree planted in a large pot that is wintered under cover.

in the pot or not

In addition to producing exotic fruit, *Ficus carica* is an attractive plant with its large, tropical leaves and graceful, pliable branches. A fig tree makes a grand statement in a large patio container, but must be provided with a winter storage space where temperatures do not go below 20°. An alternative is to select a suitable spot in your garden where, even if we have a severe winter, your plant may return each spring in shrub form and produce fruit for your enjoyment.

light and temperature

- Fig trees in the ground succeed best in a sheltered position in full sun – at least eight hours of direct sunlight.
- Consider planting your tree on the south or southeast side of a home or other structure. They will be protected from the northwest-prevailing winter winds and the walls will hold the summer's warmth to help ripen the fruit.
- Since fig trees in containers will be moved indoors for winter protection they may be placed in a sunny location with or without a sheltering wall. Wait until evening temperatures are consistently around 40°-45° before moving them from their winter home.

moisture and humidity

- Young trees will need regular watering until established. When planted in the garden, regular rainfall will suffice for mature fig trees, with supplemental water during the hottest and driest parts of the summer.
- Potted figs will require more attention to watering than those planted in the ground. Drooping leaves are a signal to increase water, while yellowing leaves may indicate over-watering. Misting regularly will keep humidity high and prevent spider mites.
- Adding a 2"-3" mulch of organic compost each spring will improve soil structure as well as help retain moisture whether your fig plant is in the garden or in a container.

soil and fertilization

- Figs are not picky about soil type, but they are shallow-rooted and appreciate good drainage. Enrich the soil with compost and a one-time addition of Turface at the time of planting so the roots can access moisture and nutrients in heavy clay soil.
- Beyond annual top-dressing with compost, fig trees planted in the ground should be lightly fed since excess fertilization can promote vegetative growth at the expense of fruit production. Each spring apply an organic, low-nitrogen, slow-release fertilizer such as Espoma Tomato-tone (3-4-6) which also has added calcium, a necessary nutrient for figs.
- Also use Tomato-tone when potting or repotting your containerized figs. In addition, use water-soluble Nature's Source Organic (3-1-1) twice a month during the growing season since containerized figs need a little extra help.
- Both types of planting will benefit from a once-a-month foliar feed of Nature's Source Organic or seaweed extract.

repotting and pruning

- Potted figs should be successively moved to slightly larger pots as they mature and add root mass. Add compost and a generous amount of Turface to the potting soil at each repotting to add weight and improve water and nutrient absorption.
- Plant size will be moderated when grown in pots but they will still be large plants. To facilitate the annual moves in and out of shelter, choose a lightweight plastic pot and consider a wheeled plant stand.
- Keep the tree about 5 to 10 feet tall by pruning in the dormant season. Remove any suckers growing vertically from the trunk or branches. Then cut back the ends of main branches by one quarter. Wear gloves to protect from irritating sap.
- Once you have reached maximum pot size for your situation, the roots can be pruned back by one-quarter to one-half and the plant returned to the same pot. Do this at the same time as a gentle top prune to balance the plant's growth needs.

fruitfulness and pruning

- In Zone 6 and north, we can count on only one autumn crop which matures from terminal buds on new spring growth.
- The breba crop are those tiny, pea-sized embryo fruit visible in the axils of the leaves in early autumn. *If* these survive the winter, they will ripen the following year in mid-summer. Perfect conditions must prevail; St. Louis is not San Diego!
- Unlike most other fruit trees, fig trees don't require pruning to be productive. They fruit on new wood which is fortunate when severe winters cause dieback. Figs will regrow from buried wood below ground with a multi-stem, shrub-like shape.
- For mature plants, it's a good practice to remove at least 50% of this new growth when it's about 2' tall and before fruit sets, thinning out to all but 5-10 stems. In summer, pinch out the tips of new shoots once they have made five or six leaves.
- Hidden inside the immature fruit are millions of thready flowers which are self-pollinating in the common fig (*Ficus carica*).
- Fruit must be allowed to ripen fully on the tree before it is picked. A ripe fig will be bronze coloured, slightly soft and starting to bend at the neck. Harvest the fruit gently to avoid bruising and pick them with the stem still attached.
- Fresh figs can be stored in the refrigerator for only 2-3 days. They can be easily dried by setting them out for 4-5 days in the sun or 10-12 hours in a dehydrator, and may then be stored for 6-8 months. Or cook, purée and freeze them.

being proactive

- Figs are relatively pest free and problems arise only when they are stressed by drought or insufficient light.
- When figs are kept growing through winter, either indoors or in a greenhouse, prevention is key. Keeping humidity levels up will help prevent spider mites. Regular inspection for scale or mealy will enable early applications of Neem Oil.
- Fig Mosaic Virus may manifest in the heat of mid-summer as mottled foliage markings but will not affect fruit quality.

preparing for winter: in the ground or in a pot

- Discontinue fertilization and scale back on watering in late summer to prevent a growth flush susceptible to freezing.
- In late November, after the fig leaves have fallen, prepare your outdoor figs for winter. Above-ground growth of figs can be damaged by temperatures of 17° and lower. Pile up bags of leaves around the base of the tree and then pile more leaves over the bags to create an insulating mound that will protect the lower trunk and branches even if cold kills the periphery.
- Younger trees are more susceptible to winter damage and can be protected by surrounding with a cylinder of frost-cloth, fastened with landscape staples. Fill the cylinder with shredded leaves and loosely tie the top. Mulch well.
- During dry falls and winters, thoroughly watering fig trees a few days before a hard freeze can help minimize freeze injury.
- Prepare containerized fig trees for dormancy in late September by moving them into an unheated sunroom, garage or basement where the temperatures stay between 20°-50°. They will drop their leaves and go dormant, but should still be watered when the soil is dry at 2-3" below the surface. Refrain from drenching or overwatering to avoid root rot.
- Figs will stay green all winter in a warm greenhouse and may even bear fruit. Water regularly and be vigilant about pests.
- In mid-May, begin moving fig trees outside for a few hours every day to acclimate, bringing back inside in the evening.
- Insulating structures around outdoor fig trees should be removed and mounded mulch pulled back gradually after the risk of spring frost has passed. Leave a sufficient amount in the root zone to help retain moisture and enrich the soil.