



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

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 which are root-hardy here in St. Louis.

### 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.
- Planting on the south or southeast side of a home or other structure will provide protection from prevailing winter winds from the northwest and the walls will hold the summer's warmth to help ripen the fruit.
- Since fig trees in containers won't need 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 outside.

### 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 require more attention to watering. Drooping leaves are a signal to increase water, while yellowing leaves may indicate over-watering. Misting regularly will keep humidity high to prevent spider mite infestations.
- 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 *Dr. Earth Mother Land Compost* and add *Turface* at the time of planting to improve soil structure.
- Beyond annual top-dressing with compost, fig trees should be lightly fed since excess fertilization can promote vegetative growth at the expense of fruit production. Each spring apply a low-nitrogen, slow-release fertilizer such as *Espoma Tomato-tone 3-4-6* which also has added calcium, a necessary nutrient for figs.
- In addition, supplement potted figs with *Espoma Bloom! 1-3-1* twice a month during the growing season.
- Both types of planting will benefit from a once-a-month foliar feed with *Nature's Source 10-4-3*.

## Repotting and Pruning

- Potted figs should be successively moved to slightly larger pots as they mature and add root mass. Add compost and *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 potted trees about 5-10 feet tall by pruning in the dormant season. Remove any vertical suckers 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 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 expect 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; we're not in San Diego!
- Fruit is produced on new wood. When winter dieback is severe, figs will regrow from buried wood below ground with a multi-stem, shrub-like shape. Not to worry, they will still produce fruit that year!
- For mature plants, it's a good practice to remove at least 50% of this spring growth once it is 2' tall but before fruit sets. Thin out to all but 5-10 stems. In summer, pinch out the tips of new shoots once they have made 5 or 6 leaves.
- Hidden inside the immature fruit are millions of thready flowers which are self-pollinating in the common fig.
- Fruit must be allowed to ripen fully on the tree before it is picked. A ripe fig will be bronze-colored, 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 then 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, 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

- Figs will stay green all winter in a warm greenhouse and may even bear fruit. Water regularly; be vigilant about pests.
- Discontinue fertilization and scale back on watering in late summer to prevent a growth flush susceptible to freezing.
- Prepare potted 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.
- During dry falls and winters, thoroughly watering outdoor fig trees when frost is forecast will minimize cold damage.
- In late November, after their 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.
- Younger trees are more susceptible to winter damage and can be protected by surrounding them with a cylinder of frost-cloth, fastened with landscape staples. Fill the cylinder with shredded leaves and loosely tie the top. When the risk of frost has passed (after April 15<sup>th</sup>) these insulating structures should gradually be pulled open, then removed.