



FIG

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INTRODUCTION

Figs (*Ficus carica*) are one of the easiest, most problem-free fruits you can grow. Not many people realize the range of varieties and the differences in textures and flavors among varieties. Some have a light, sweet, maple-syrup flavor while others are as thick and rich as strawberry jam. Most people are familiar with the summer ripening varieties but are unaware of the range of fall ripening figs. With proper variety selection it is possible to have tree-ripe figs from July through September. If birds are a problem choose a light skinned variety. Birds have a built-in notion that ripe figs are dark. They tend to leave the green skinned varieties alone. All figs suitable for the Southeast United States are self-pollinating.

USES IN THE LANDSCAPE

Small by nature, the fig tree is ideal for use in the shrubbery border. Their distinctive leaves make an excellent accent or specimen tree. Try mingling the broad, deeply lobed leaves of the fig with the willowy pomegranate and fine-textured, misty blue tones of the blueberry. Tie it all together with a lush groundcover of strawberries for a never-ending cycle of flowers, fruit and fall color.

The smooth, limber trunk of the young fig is perfect for training into espalier or twisting into odd specimen trees. Lay the trunk flat against the ground and the new vertical shoots make an instant hedge. Small-space gardeners take note. The root restraint of container growing brings extra-bountiful crops from the fig.

CULTIVAR SELECTION

We have selected and propagated over 20 self-fertile varieties suitable for home growing in the humid Southeast. Varieties requiring a fig wasp pollinator cannot be grown outside of commercial fig-growing areas in California because the fig wasp is absent. In addition, we suggest the group called closed eye figs. At the bottom of the fruit is an opening known as the eye. Water

or insects can pass through this opening and cause fruit rot. Varieties with a long neck or peduncle allow the fruit to droop, preventing moisture or pests from entering the eye.

PLANTING AND CULTURE

SITE SELECTION

Figs will grow on a wide range of soils when good drainage is provided. Figs grown in soils high in organic matter or clay content are less subject to nematode damage. Plant in full sun for vigorous growth and good fruit crops. Avoid frost pockets - and damage by unseasonable frosts.

SOIL PREPARATION AND PLANTING

Figs prefer slightly acid soil (pH 5.5-6.5), but soils of up to moderate alkalinity are readily tolerated. If you are in doubt about the acidity of your soil, it is very easy to take a sample to the Cooperative Extension agent in your county for a soil test. Adjust soil pH as necessary.

Dig a planting hole at least twice as big as the pot and twice as deep. In sandy soils make the hole much larger, 3 foot wide and 3 foot deep (yes, you read that right), and use more organic matter to help combat nematodes. Enrich the planting hole with compost, manure or pine bark mixed with soil dug from the hole (50:50 mix). 6 to 8 inches of mushroom compost and rotted manure used as mulch are excellent amendments to fight nematodes for figs.

Remove the fig from the pot, gently loosen the root ball and place in the planting hole. The fig should be planted **at or slightly above** the same level it grew in its pot. Fill the planting hole with the mix of soil and organic matter; gently tamp it in. Water thoroughly to settle the roots and eliminate air pockets. Do NOT put fertilizer in the planting hole. Only apply fertilizer if it is the correct time of year (see Fertilization section below).

If desired, construct a water basin around the base of the fig approximately 36 inches in diameter. Mulch in spring and summer with approximately 6-8 inches of mulch. In spring, we suggest a mix of compost and weed-free hay, while in summer use weed-free hay or grass clippings alone. Keep the area under the tree canopy clear of grass and weeds to minimize competition for water and nutrients.

Spacing for figs depends upon the desired use in the landscape. Bushes can be planted individually or in a hedgerow. Individual tree spacing is 15 to 20 feet. If planting a hedgerow, space 6-10 feet apart. All figs suitable for the Southeast are self-pollinating, so bushes may be planted as desired in the landscape.

FERTILIZATION

We use and recommend the Espoma line of organic fertilizers. Espoma's Citrus Tone is a good choice for fig trees. When not available look for an organic mix that contains an analyst of roughly 5-2-6. Make sure they contain iron, zinc, manganese, magnesium, molybdenum, copper and boron. These minor elements are very important to plants and most soils are low in these elements. Application rates vary according to type and age of plant, so read the instructions on the bag and fertilize accordingly. Be sure to spread the fertilizer evenly over the fig's root zone avoiding a 2-inch area around the trunk. Water or rake in. For Zones 8a-10, fertilize 3 times each year in February, May and late July/early August. For plants

further north (Zones 6-7), fertilize 2 times each year in March and June/July. Never fertilize after August (July in Zones 6-7) as this will promote new growth when the plant needs to go dormant.

WATER

The first year is the critical time for the establishment of a new fig. Water thoroughly twice a week on light soils and once a week on clay soils. Soak the entire root system deeply. Established figs should receive at least 1 inch of water each week. Water regularly, especially during dry periods.

PRUNING

At the time of planting, cut off young trees to 30 inches above the ground. In the first growing season, the shoots that arise where the tree was topped form the scaffold limbs. During the first dormant season, select 3-4 scaffold branches spaced equally around the trunk and remove other branches flush with the trunk. Top these limbs down to 36 inches from the trunk to encourage secondary branching.

Continue to train fig trees during the first 5 years. Pruning should be designed to train the tree upward and outward by thinning crossing branches. Topping out shoots that have grown over 3 foot to encourage side branches will encourage heavier fruit set.

Mature trees are pruned during the dormant season. Thin out branches and head back long shoots as needed to maintain tree shape. An unpruned tree will tend to be overly thick, lack vigor and produce small, inferior quality figs. Prune to stimulate approximately a foot of new growth on most limbs each year. Remove any dead, damaged or diseased branches when pruning. Do not remove freeze-damaged branches until growth resumes in the spring and the extent of damage can be accurately assessed.

Alternatively, remove 1/4 of the oldest limbs to the ground each year. This reduces tree height and will tend to stimulate a suitable amount of new growth.

FROST PROTECTION

Very young figs may be damaged or killed at temperatures below 25°F. For the first year after planting we suggest that trees be covered. This is especially important in trees that have not entered dormancy or which have begun growth in the spring. If an established tree sustains frost damage, wait until growth has resumed in the spring to assess injury and remove dead limbs. With age the tree will develop a certain degree of cold tolerance.

For Zone 7 and above, figs must be protected from winter cold. We suggest that the plants be surrounded by a wire cage and mulched heavily with leaves. The cage should be topped with tarpaper or plastic to keep the branches dry in the winter. Remove the cage and mulch in the spring after it warms.

Figs grown as container plants are also subject to frost damage since roots are above ground in a pot. Container figs should be kept at or above 25°F during winter. The grower of container figs will be rewarded with a good crop, since root restriction in figs promotes heavy fruit set.

INSECT AND DISEASE CONTROL

Root knot nematodes may be a problem on sandy soils. Trees weakened by nematodes do not grow well and may not fruit. You probably have nematodes if you find small knots on the roots. In

our area, nematodes may be reduced or eliminated through the use of heavy mulches and incorporation of large amounts of organic matter in the soil at the time of planting.

Fig Rust can be a problem in rainy seasons. It shows up as rusty brown discoloration on the leaf, resulting in distorted leaves and early leaf fall. This fungus can be controlled with a copper spray applied every 2-3 weeks from June to August. In addition, rake and burn fallen leaves in the fall to remove the source of fungal spores that might re-infect the tree the following year.

VARIETY LIST – FOR MORE VARIETIES GO TO OUR WEBSITE

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ALMA -- A Texas A&M University release, highly resistant to fruit rots. The fruit is a beautiful light yellowish-green. Inside is a halo of white meat with a light strawberry center. A good drying variety with a high sugar content and excellent flavor. Continuous cropper. Ripens mid July till frost.

BROWN TURKEY -- Large, rich, purplish-brown fruit with delicious strawberry-pink flesh. Very popular in the South because of its dependable crops. Ripens late July to mid August.

CELESTE--- Known as the "sugar fig", Celeste produces medium sized fruit with light brown to violet skin, and strawberry-pink flesh. One of the best varieties for drying and preserves. Tight eye resists rots. Ripens mid July to mid August.

CONADRIA -- A fig bred by the leading California fig breeder Ira Condit. It's a combination of his name and the drying fig "Adriatic" from which it was bred. The tree is a strong vigorous grower. Fruit is 2 1/2 inches wide with light greenish-yellow skin and sweet juicy strawberry-pink pulp. Flavor is excellent. Ripens mid July to mid August.

GREEN ISHIA -- Large trees that produce bountiful crops of excellent figs. The skin is a dark green color, which is very helpful in deterring birds, as they can't tell if or when it's ripe. Inside though, you'll find a delicious ruby-red fig. Ripens late July to early August.

HOLLIER -- A superb new cultivar from LSU. It is a very dependable performer with medium to large, sweet fruit. Excellent flavor.

HUNT -- Cold resistant, compact grower. One of the best for the home garden, with long-necked, violet brown figs. Dependable, heavy cropper.

JELLY -- A long-necked yellow fig. As the name implies, this fig is virtually seedless, with flesh that looks like clear apple jelly. Trees are rampant growers, spreading to 15 feet. Ripens late August to mid September.

LSU GOLD -- Huge bright golden fig with amber flesh that is tender and very sweet. Vigorous grower with a fig at every leaf axil.

O'ROUKE-- LSU took a great Celeste and improved the yield and fruit size. Light brown to violet skin, and strawberry pink flesh. One of the best varieties for drying and preserves. Tight eye resists rots. Ripens mid July to mid August.

TENA -- A new California variety that is highly resistant to fruit rot. The fruit is a beautiful light yellow green; inside is a halo of white flesh, surrounding a light strawberry center. Tena is a good drying variety with a high sugar content and excellent flavor. Ripens mid July to late August.

SMITH -- Heirloom from Louisiana. Big flat yellow fig with brown shading and a deep red flesh. Viewed as one of the best tasting in the southern parishes of Louisiana.