

# JUST FRUITS AND EXOTICS

## FIG

### 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 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.

### CULTIVATOR 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 + 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 approximately three times the width of the pot and at the same depth as the root ball. Set that soil aside and mix it 50/50 with either aged mushroom compost, aged manure, or rotted pine bark & aged manure/compost. Remove the plant from the pot, gently loosen the root ball and place in the planting hole. To avoid burying too deep, make sure plant is positioned with the top most roots at the soil line. 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. Pull mulch a couple of inches away from the trunk for good air circulation. Mushroom compost and rotted manure are excellent mulches for fighting off nematodes in figs. 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.

### VARIETIES

A detailed Variety List can be found on our website: [justfruitsandexotics.com](http://justfruitsandexotics.com)

## FERTILIZATION

The type of fertilizer you choose may be chemical or organic. Make sure that the fertilizer contains 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 age of plant. See chart below:

<b>Starter Fertilizer &amp; Soil (Apply at Planting)</b>	<b>Fertilizer to Maintain (Apply Early March, Late May, &amp; Late July)</b>
Espoma Bio-tone® Starter Plus Mix Mushroom Compost in Soil	Espoma Tree-tone®

Notes:

- Follow Instructions on Bag for how much to apply each time.
- Months to Fertilize vary based on your zone. Fertilize 3 times per year. We recommend the 1<sup>st</sup> fertilization starting after the last Freeze of the winter (Late February/Early March in zone 8) & the last Fertilization being no later than August or even June/July in some of the colder zones 7 & below.)
- Fertilizing too late in the year in colder climates will promote new growth, which will be subject to freeze damage.

See our “Planting a Tree Correctly” Guide & Espoma Bio-tone® and Tree-tone® Fact Sheets on our website for more info.

## 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 – this usually takes 40-50 minutes. Figs should receive at least 1 inch of water each week for best growth and fruit production. Water regularly, especially during dry periods. Fruit may drop prematurely if insufficiently irrigated during dry spells.

## INSECTS + DISEASE

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.

## 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