Ficus carica
Fig Tree

INTRODUCTION

The fig is a picturesque deciduous tree, that if grown in the ground to 50 ft tall, but more typically in containers, a height of 5 to 6 ft. Their branches are muscular and twisting, spreading wider than they are tall. Fig wood is weak and decays rapidly. The trunk often bears large nodal tumors, where branches have been shed or removed. The twigs are terete and pithy rather than woody. The sap contains copious milky latex that is irritating to human skin. Fig trees often grow as a multiple-branched shrub, especially where subjected to frequent frost damage. They may be espaliered, but only where roots may be restricted, as in containers.

LOCATION

Figs require full sun all day to ripen palatable fruits. Trees become enormous, and will shade out anything growing beneath. Repeated pruning to control size causes loss of crop. The succulent trunk and branches are unusually sensitive to heat and sun damage, and should be whitewashed if particularly exposed. Roots are greedy, traveling far beyond the tree canopy. The fine roots that invade garden beds, however, may be cut without loss to the tree. In areas with short (less than 120 days between frosts), cool summers, espalier trees against a south-facing, light-colored wall to take advantage of the reflected heat. In coastal climates, grow in the warmest location, against a sunny wall or in a heat trap. For container grown plants, replace most of the soil in the tub every three years and keep the sides of the tub shaded to prevent overheating in sunlight.

WATER

Young fig tees should be watered regularly until fully established. In dry western climates, water mature trees deeply at least every one or two weeks. Desert gardeners may have to water more frequently. Mulch the soil around the trees to conserve moisture. If a tree is not getting enough water, the leaves will turn yellow and drop. Also, drought-stressed trees will not produce fruit and are more susceptible to nematode damage. Recently planted trees are particularly susceptible to water deficits, often runt out, and die.

FERTILIZATION

Regular fertilizing of figs is usually necessary only for potted trees or when they are grown on sands. Excess nitrogen encourages rank growth at the expense of fruit production, and the fruit that is produced often ripens improperly, if at all. As a general rule, fertilize fig trees if the branches grew less than a foot the previous year. Apply a total of 1/2 - 1 pound of actual nitrogen, divided into three or four applications beginning in late winter or early spring and ending in July.

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FROST PROTECTION

In borderline climates, figs can be grown out of doors if they are given frost protection. Brown Turkey, Brunswick and Blue Celeste cultivars are some of the best choices. Plant against a wall or structure which provides some heat by radiation. Or grow as a bush, pruning the trunk to near ground level at the end of the second year. Allow several stems to replace the trunk, and grow as you would a lilac. For further protection, erect a frame over the plant, covering and surrounding it with heavy carpet in winter. Keep the roots as dry as possible during winter, raising a berm to exclude melting snows during thaws. In northern climates, the fig is best grown as a tub or pot plant that can be brought into a warm location in winter and taken out again in spring. Dormant buds are more susceptible to freezing than wood. Freezing may also create a trunk without live buds; regrowth is possible only from roots.

FRUIT/HARVEST

Figs must be allowed to ripen fully on the tree before they are picked. They will not ripen if picked when immature. A ripe fruit will be slightly soft and starting to bend at the neck. Harvest the fruit gently to avoid bruising. Fresh figs do not keep well and can be stored in the refrigerator for only 2 - 3 days. Some fig varieties are delicious when dried. They take 4 - 5 days to dry in the sun and 10 -12 hours in a dehydrator. Dried figs can be stored for six to eight months.

MAINTENANCE

Fig trees are productive with or without heavy pruning. It is essential only during the initial years. Trees should be trained according to use of fruit, such as a low crown for fresh-market figs. Since the crop is borne on terminals of previous year's wood, once the tree form is established, avoid heavy winter pruning, which causes loss of the following year's crop. It is better to prune immediately after the main crop is harvested, or with late-ripening cultivars, summer prune half the branches and prune the remainder the following summer. If radical pruning is done, whitewash the entire tree.