

# How to Grow Beautiful and Productive Fig Trees

The occasional pejorative use of the term “fig leaf” is wholly undeserved.

The leaves of the fig tree (*Ficus carica*) are quite lovely – large, beautifully shaped, and generous in their provision of shade.

It is entirely unjust that the leaves of this lovely tree have been so maligned throughout history, likely due to their part in the biblical story of Adam and Eve.

Any plant that gives us food, beauty, and shelter surely deserves our respect and admiration, rather than our scorn.

## Cultivation and History

Native to the Middle East and northwestern Asia, figs are one of the earliest known cultivated fruit trees. There's evidence that they were cultivated in Mesopotamia 12,000 years ago.

Ancient Greeks, Egyptians, and Romans grew them for food, wine, and medicine, and the tree was brought to North America by Spanish missionaries in the early sixteenth century.

Turkey, Egypt, and Spain are the largest commercial producers today.

Easy-to-grow figs are members of the Moraceae family, which also includes [mulberries](#).

These trees can be left unprotected in [USDA Hardiness Zones](#) 8 to 10. Gardeners in northern Zones can grow these plants in containers and bring them indoors when temperatures drop below 10°F.

Determined growers can even find [cold-hardy figs](#) that can survive down to Zone 6 with some protection.

These trees are relatively fast growing, and they get big – most grow to 20 or even 30 feet tall, and almost as wide. Some can even grow 70 feet tall!

The shade provided by their girth and large leaves is well-appreciated. In fact, the founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, is said to have found enlightenment while sitting under a fig tree.

In the right conditions, some species will produce two crops in a year. The first, called a “breba” crop, ripens in late May or early June, and a second harvest will be ready in late September to early November.

These different crops appear on different buds: the apical bud and the lateral bud. Breba buds develop on last year’s growth while the second crop develops on older wood. The lateral buds are below the apical or breba buds.

The fruits can be green to nearly black, and the flesh can range from white to nearly black, as well. They can also be pear-shaped, round, or oval.

The first time you encountered a fig, if you can remember it, you might have marveled at how unusual it is. The fruits don’t have a center pit like a stone fruit, nor are they filled with seeds like a [pomegranate](#).

That’s because the fruits are actually inverted flowers. In botanical terms, this is known as a syconium. Those sort of fuzzy bits surrounding the hollow interior of the syconium are the female and male flowers.

But since we all know them as fruits, that’s what we’ll call them in this guide.

## **Fig Tree Propagation**

It’s possible to grow figs from seed, but it’s a long, difficult, drawn-out process with unreliable results. Best leave it to the experts.

If you want to recreate a plant you love, cloning cuttings is an easy and reliable way to do it. Otherwise, you can find figs for sale at nurseries in containers.

Let’s talk about cuttings first.

### **From Cuttings**

This species is astonishingly easy to propagate. Simply sneak into your neighbor’s yard in the dead of night, [pruners in hand](#)...

We jest. Ask permission and take an eight- to 10-inch cutting of young growth in the early spring. Cut the bottom end at a 45-degree angle, and dip it in rooting hormone if you wish.

Rooting hormone helps speed up the process, but it's not absolutely necessary with figs. They are pretty good at growing from cuttings all on their own.

Still, it never hurts to try and push the process along.

Stick the cutting in a six-inch pot filled with potting soil, with a third of the cutting set below the surface and one or two leaf buds above the soil line. Let the cutting grow in the container for a season outdoors in a spot with at least six hours of sunlight per day.

Be sure to keep the soil moist but not wet. If you live in Zones 6 or 7, bring the plant indoors during the winter and keep it in a sunny window or under [grow light](#).

The following spring, transplant it.

They are happiest with seven to eight hours of [full sun](#) during the growing season. The more sun they receive, the more productive your tree will be.

When choosing a site for your tree, don't underestimate its ability and desire to spread out. It might feel a bit crowded if it's too close to a wall or fence. Check the ultimate size at maturity and give yourself a few extra feet beyond that.

These trees aren't too picky about their soil, although they prefer well-drained loam with lots of organic matter. The soil pH should be anywhere from 6.0 to 7.5.

Figs are drought tolerant, but are happiest with a drink now and then. However, too much water can cause root rot. And it reduces the concentration of sugar in the fruits, which you don't want either.

The best strategy is to water well before fruit formation and taper off slightly after that.

Before fruit-set, the soil should stay consistently moist but not soggy. After fruit-set, only water when the top four inches of soil dry out.

Then, if you get frost in your area, don't water at all in the two months prior to frost. This helps strengthen the branches in preparation for winter, a process known as lignification.

To improve budding and fruit set, place black mulch around the base of your tree, but not touching it. This will help increase the temperature of the soil. Figs develop best when the soil is around 78°F.

These trees generally do just fine without any fertilizing.

If it seems your tree is being stingy with its spring leaf development, give it some balanced fertilizer such as 10-10-10 (NPK), according to package instructions, to jumpstart it.

Don't fertilize after fruit-set.

## **Growing Tips**

- Grow in full sun, or expect a reduced harvest in partial sun.
- Trees are drought tolerant but perform better with regular moisture.
- Fertilize only if a soil test shows it's necessary.

## **Pruning and Maintenance**

These trees aren't like stone fruits, which need regular pruning to refresh and optimize production. In fact, figs require little or no pruning.

An ill-placed branch can certainly be removed to unblock a path if needed, of course. Do so in the winter.

And you'll want to remove any deadwood any time you see it. You should also prune every few years to maximize light exposure and improve air circulation. Do this when the tree is dormant in the winter as well.

Then, take a clean pair of clippers or a saw and cut the branch.

## **Fig Tree Cultivars to Select**

Of the four main types of figs, three – Caprifigs, Smyrna, and San Pedro – are not usually grown by home gardeners, because they have complex pollination requirements.

The fourth type, the common fig, is parthenocarpic, meaning the fruit forms without fertilization. Let's look at a few varieties of this type.

### **Black Mission**

Super-southern gardeners might want to try 'Black Mission' – it's a vigorous grower, but not particularly cold hardy.

This variety produces two crops of large, rich-tasting, purple-black fruits that are tasty fresh or dried. You'll get a lot of them, too, because this tree grows up to 35 feet tall.

### **Brown Turkey**

'Brown Turkey' is another favorite, especially for more northern gardeners.

It's more cold-hardy than some other varieties, thriving in Zones 7 to 9, and it grows to about 30 feet up in ideal conditions.

This tree produces smaller fruit that is not quite as richly flavored as ‘Celeste,’ which we’ll cover next, but it does often produce a breba crop. And that means figs to pick for more of the year!

### **Celeste**

One of the most commonly planted fig trees in North America is ‘Celestial’ or Celeste.

### **Desert King**

‘Desert King’ should probably be named Winter King. This tree has been known to survive the winter as far north as Zone 5, though that’s tempting Mother Nature. Planting in Zone 6 and up is safest.

The yellow-green fruits and pink pulp are sweet and strawberry-like. ‘Desert King’ grows to a respectable 15 feet tall, which is not too tall or too small for most home growers’ needs.

If you live in a cooler climate, grab one for your garden [at Fast Growing Trees](#).

### **Hardy Chicago**

‘Hardy Chicago,’ aka ‘Bensonhurst Purple,’ is another cold-hardy cultivar that thrives in Zones 5 to 11. It will require some winter care at the more northern range of its tolerance.

Growing to a mature height of 10 to 15 feet tall and a spread of nine to 12 feet, ‘Hardy Chicago’ produces brownish-purple fruits that look similar to those of ‘Brown Turkey.’

### **Little Miss Figgy**

I mean, with a name like that, who could possibly resist?

Little Miss Figgy is ideal for anyone who needs a tree they can move around.

Bring it indoors in colder regions as needed or move it around your patio to chase the sun. It can stay outdoors in Zones 7 to 10.

It won’t grow much larger than five feet, and while you won’t be harvesting bushels of fruit, it will certainly give you enough to keep your family in fruit with both a breba and a secondary crop.

The dark purple figs are fabulously sweet. If you’ve ever had ‘Violette de Bordeaux’ fruit, then you know how tasty this variety is because it was bred from that marvelous tree.

Pick one up [at Fast Growing Trees](#).

## Managing Pests and Disease

While there are a few diseases and insect pests that can be a challenge to manage, your biggest foes will usually be herbivores. Let's get the bad news out of the way first.

### Herbivores

You didn't think herbivores like birds and squirrels would ignore these sweet, delectable treats, did you?

Let's talk about the critters that are eyeballing your treats:

#### Birds

Birds will snag a bud or immature fruit and I've seen them nibbling on mature fruits, too. But generally, there are enough fruits to share and I don't do anything to deter birds.

Now, squirrels, on the other hand...

#### Squirrels

Squirrels. Grrrrrrrr. They act all cute and sweet, with their big fluffy tails and their cute little hands.

But believe me when I tell you that these little jerks are going to be a lot less adorable come harvest time.

The one thing squirrels will go for above everything else? Figs. Some gardeners have luck Decoys, motion sensors, and other deterrents. Some gardeners cover each fig in a little bag, but that's impractical if you have a 20-foot-tall tree. I've just resigned myself to sharing.

#### Insects

Take a breath because insect pests are probably going to be less of a problem than squirrels. Really, the biggest risk is that they'll spread unwelcome diseases.

Watch for [aphids](#), and here are two of the most problematic creepy-crawlies you may encounter:

#### Fig Scale

If you've ever dealt with scale insects on your houseplants or plants in the garden, this is the same thing, just on a larger, um... scale.

Fig scale (*Lepidosaphes conchiformis*) are medium or dark brown scale insects with a greasy, waxy coating. Fig wax scale (*Ceroplastes rusci*) are brownish-pink and have a domed shape that resembles an oyster shell.

They can be found feeding on leaves, twigs, and fruit of the tree, sucking out the sap.

They tend to cluster in groups and they don't move quickly, so they're often mistaken for a disease or strange growth rather than a pest.

Make no mistake, they're eating your tree, causing stippling and stunted growth on young trees.

Don't use pesticides on this insect. They're generally ineffective and they can hurt [beneficial insects](#). If you have a severe scale infestation, it's likely because there's an imbalance in your garden already.

You can scrape them off of young trees with a butter knife, and use a dormant oil during the winter to kill off overwintering pests.

Mature trees won't usually need treatment, but it never hurts to beef up your beneficial predator populations.

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Figs are susceptible to a couple of different fungal blights, including botrytis limb and pink blight, so let's talk about blight first.

### **Botrytis Blight**

Caused by the fungus *Botrytis cinerea*, Botrytis blight results in cankers that girdle twigs and limbs and cause them to die back.

This disease usually impacts just a few branches here and there and it's not the entire tree that will be affected.

Botrytis loves cool, wet weather, so spring is when it really sparkles.

Prevention is the best medicine, so spray your trees with copper fungicide in the spring as the leaves emerge and repeat every three weeks until the warmer, drier weather arrives.

Copper fungicide works against all kinds of fungal diseases, which makes it worth keeping around.

If Botrytis is already present, prune away any symptomatic limbs and treat with copper. Clean up your garden in the fall and dispose of any symptomatic fruit in the garbage, not in your compost.

Fruit will be covered in a gray mold when infected. If you've ever purchased a carton of [strawberries and one or two are moldy](#), that's the same pathogen.

### **Fig Mosaic**

Fig mosaic is caused by a virus which is spread on infected garden tools and by pests.

When the virus infects a tree, it causes the leaves to develop yellow and light green lesions and patches. These patches will eventually develop a reddish band around the edges.

Fruit may also become discolored.

While 'Kadota' and 'Calimyrna' are nearly immune, most other figs are susceptible, with 'Black Mission' being particularly prone.

Unfortunately, there's nothing you can do if the disease is present. Just support your tree to keep it healthy otherwise.

### **Rust**

Rust is another type of blight to be aware of. It's a fungus that shows up on the underside of leaves as raised, reddish-brown spots.

Rust is not usually fatal, and unless it's an annual problem, spraying with a fungicide is not necessary. Prune off any heavily infested leaves or branches and dispose of the material.

If the disease keeps returning year after year, spray with a copper fungicide early in the spring and again every other week for a total of four treatments.



## Harvesting Fig Fruit

When figs are ready to be harvested, they soften and change color, with the sugars fully developing and the caustic sap being eliminated from the fruit. This typically happens about two to three weeks after the 30-day period.

One way to tell if your figs are ready to harvest is when the neck becomes nice and soft and the fruit droops. If you harvest the fruit, no white sap will leak out of the neck.

Don't press the base of the fruit and assume it's good to go just because it's soft. These fruits ripen from the bottom up. It might still be unripe at the neck though the base feels ready and you'll be disappointed.

The ripe fruits will be soft to the touch and the skin may begin to split. If you're growing a brown variety, the skin will darken to a brownish-purple color just before harvest time. But you can't rely on color for green types.

You'll want to grab them at just the right time. Picked too soon, they aren't yummy – and they won't ripen once removed from the plant.

Here's the tricky part: You have to time the harvest of the fruit perfectly, so you get them when they're just ripe, but before the \$%&#@#! squirrels get them! Or the birds.

Some gardeners cover smaller trees with netting to dissuade wildlife, but this is impractical with large trees. You simply have to be diligent about watching for ripeness and then beating the crafty creatures to the goods.

## Preserving Fig Fruit

Harvested figs have a fairly short shelf life; store them in the refrigerator for two or three days, tops.

[To dry these fruits](#), wash them thoroughly and then dry them with a towel. Place them whole or halved on a wire rack. Place the wire rack on a baking sheet.

Put the baking sheet in a 140°F oven for eight to 24 hours, checking the fruit for moisture and turning it as needed.

You can also use a dehydrator, following the same instructions. Learn more about dehydrators from this article [on our sister site, Foodal](#).

You'll know they're dry when the outsides become leathery and you don't see any juice on the inside. They should still be slightly pliable.

Store the dried fruit in the refrigerator or freezer in airtight containers for 18 to 24 months.

## Recipes and Cooking Ideas

If eating figs like candy somehow gets tiresome, you can preserve the fruits or add them to any number of recipes.

This recipe for tahini, honey-roasted fig, and banana popsicles from [our sister site, Foodal](#) is delicious. These frozen treats are filling and not too sweet.

Packed with figs, banana, and tahini, they do double-duty as breakfast or dessert.

Or if you have an abundant harvest, check out this recipe for easy fig jam, also [from Foodal](#). You can use your fresh, homemade jam in a hearty roasted chicken panini. Doesn't that sound delicious? You can find the recipe over [at Foodal](#).

## Welcome the Fig Leaf

Clearly, we are wholly in favor of dismissing any negative connotations regarding the use of the fig leaf as a cover for things disagreeable.

Indeed, the fig is a most agreeable and generous specimen of a plant whose fruit is more than 50 percent sugar. We dare you to cast aspersions on this benevolent beauty.

In fact, we ask: Why wouldn't you plant this species? Southern gardeners, select a wide spot. Soon you'll all be members of the fig fanatics club!

Do you have fantastic figs in your yard? Planning your late-night neighborhood escapade to "borrow" from the neighbors? Tell us more in the comments section below.