

# FIGS



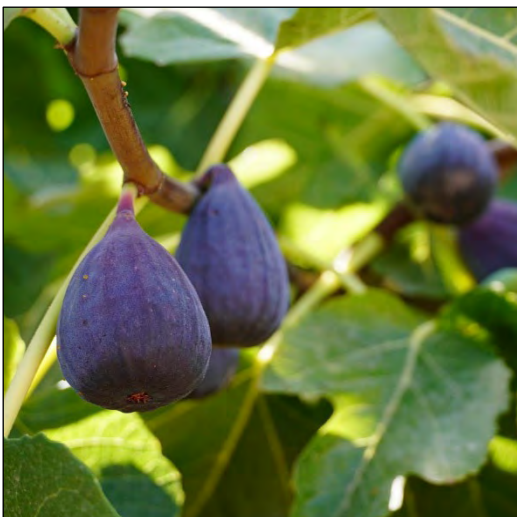
Native to the Middle East, figs are one of the oldest cultivated plants, grown by people more than 11,000 years ago. In the wild, figs in the Mediterranean area are either male or female and are pollinated by a specialized fig wasp. These wasps can't survive in our climate. Trees that are commercially available today have naturally mutated to be able to produce fruit without pollination and are all female.

## ENJOYING THE FRUIT

People have been eating figs for centuries, and for good reason: they're delicious, good for you, and easy to prepare and store. They have sweet, juicy flesh, tender skin, and crunchy seeds. The leaves of the plant are also edible.

Figs are typically enjoyed fresh or dried and can be cooked into cakes, pies, jams, and sauces. The versatile fig is equally tasty in sweet and savory dishes.

Figs are higher in minerals than many other fruits and are an excellent source of calcium, potassium, and magnesium. As a high-fiber food, figs have traditionally been used to promote digestive health.



## CHOOSING A SITE

The success of your harvest depends on your fig tree's location, so choose the warmest, hottest spot you can. Ideally, plant near a wall that provides shelter from north winds as well as a thermal mass. Figs need full sun to ensure that the fruit ripens by late summer, so a south-facing spot is best. In the ground, figs prefer soil with a pH of 6.0–6.5.

## PLANTING

Space fig trees 8-10 feet apart. Avoid planting in soggy areas; they like fertile, humus-rich soil with good-to-moderate drainage.

If your fig is small and young, it can grow in a 5-gallon pot that's moved inside in winter for the first year or two. Then you can plant it in the ground when it has a good root system; this is a good way to produce a strong, resilient tree. Transplant into the ground or into a larger pot when the plant is still dormant, in the early spring.

You can propagate figs trees from cuttings. Green cuttings tend to be less successful than woodier ones, and the greatest success seems to be with the 1-year-old stems. [Richters Nursery](#) in Ontario, Canada, has a big selection of fig cuttings.

## TAKING CARE: WATERING, FEEDING, PRUNING

Give your fig tree a good layer of compost each year, out to the drip line.

Prune yearly to encourage new fruit shoots. You can take the plant down to just a few trunks to concentrate the energy or can let all the stems develop; your approach depends on the look you prefer. Do prune out the really vigorous growth (like water sprouts); cut this growth in half to encourage lateral development and more figs next year.

In a pot, fig trees should be watered nearly daily to prevent fruit from dropping early. But check the soil, which should dry out between waterings. Add an organic balanced fertilizer like North Country Organics Pro-Gro 5-3-4 once a month; the amount depends on the tree size. Once a week, add a dilute

fish emulsion. In the ground, a fig tree should be fed once a month with dilute fish emulsion. Water weekly, or more during drought periods.

Trees planted outside need winter protection once the temperature drops below 20°F. Usually, a fig's above-ground growth must survive the winter in order to fruit the following season. The roots are hardy and will survive, but if stems need to grow again from scratch, you likely won't get fruit early enough to ripen that year. To protect your plant, cut stems down to a reasonable height, add some soil and/or mulch around the base to protect the roots, and then wrap with burlap, tar paper, or an old carpet. This setup will attract field mice, which can damage your stems, so add a deterrent such as mothballs around the trunk before wrapping. Cover the wrap with plastic to keep out moisture and prevent mold.

If your fig is in a pot, you can bring it indoors around mid-December, after the plant has hardened off but before the temperature drops below 20°F. Indoors, simulate a Mediterranean winter, somewhere between freezing and the low 40s. An insulated but unheated space works. If the location is too warm, the tree will start to put out leaves too early. Light isn't necessary, and it doesn't need much water, so every 4–6 weeks will do. Move the plant back outside in April, before new growth appears; you want to keep it dormant as long as possible.

## AVOIDING PESTS AND DISEASE

Figs have minimal pest and disease issues.

## HARVESTING

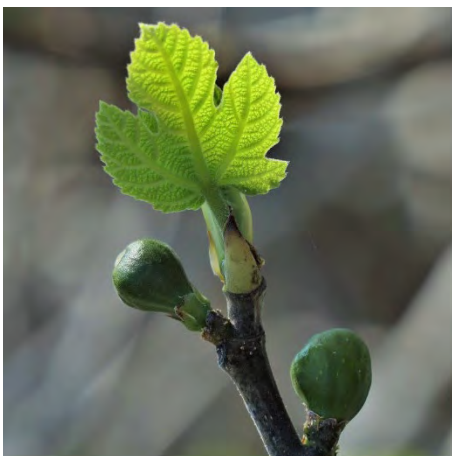
Plants that are 2–3 years old should produce fruit, and a 10-year-old tree can yield more than 100 figs each year. Harvest when the figs are soft to the touch. You can store them in the refrigerator for a few weeks. Hardy Chicago Fig has an early crop in July and a second larger crop ripening from August to fall.

## CONSIDERING SPECIFIC VARIETIES

A plethora of varieties came to the US with immigrants from the Mediterranean regions who wanted to bring a piece of home with them. Several varieties do well in the Cape climate.

We've seen the most success with Chicago Hardy; its stems survive to 10°F and its roots to –20°F. This variety flowers early, so the figs have time to ripen. This brown fig is rich and sweet and is a dependable outdoor plant.

Other varieties said to withstand our climate include Olympian, Negronne, Violette de Bordeaux, Celeste, and Brown Turkey.



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