

## Growing Figs in Victoria

In Victoria, British Columbia, figs (*Ficus carica*) are fairly easy to grow. The key to successfully growing figs is to choose a variety that will ripen properly in our area. Fig trees can last for generations if they are properly maintained. One of the authors and several of her neighbours have successfully grown figs. One neighbour grows two 'Brown Turkey' figs in his south-facing backyard against a white 6-foot high wall. He also has a small fig tree (bush) about 4 feet tall growing on his sundeck. He says watering and careful protection against our cool west coast winters has given him a great crop of figs for over 10 years.

Figs grow best and produce the best quality fruit in the Mediterranean and other drier, warm-temperate climates. Luckily Victoria enjoys a Mediterranean-like climate, with fairly mild winters with occasional cold snaps. Cold snaps are not ideal for sun-loving figs but, with extra care, figs will flourish in the wetter, cooler areas of Victoria.

Fruit tree catalogues list fig trees as hardy throughout Zones 7 to 11 without protection; and in Zones 4 to 7 with winter cover. Your yard's microclimate will determine whether a fig tree will flourish. Figs are rated as hardy in Victoria's Zone 8. Winter cold below -10 can damage branch tips and may cause the fig tree to die to the ground but they should re-sprout the following spring.

Figs require at least six hours of full sun daily for the fruit to ripen properly. A white painted, heat-reflecting wall situated behind the fig tree is desirable, especially on the cool West Coast. In the right conditions, a fig tree can become quite sizable and shade out anything growing beneath it. Figs are not available on dwarfing rootstocks, so they grow to full size. Commercial fig trees in California may grow to 50 feet but typically in Victoria, depending upon cultivar and growing conditions, figs generally do not top 10-15 feet. Figs are not suitable for small spaces. The roots of fig trees grow far beyond their leaf canopy and can take up a large amount of space in your garden. The shallow, fine roots that invade garden beds, however, may be cut without loss to the tree. This is why figs can grow quite well in containers. For root restriction in your garden, grow figs in a sort of underground box made of bricks or stones, which promotes good cropping. Trees can also be grown in a fan shaped espalier, which allows sun to reach all the fruit.

The fig's fruit is called a syconium. This means that the tiny flowers of the fig are clustered out of sight inside the green outer covering of the fig. The common figs that are appropriate for growing in Victoria are parthenocarpic, meaning all the flowers are female and need no pollination. The common fig bears a first crop, called the *breba* crop, in the summer on last season's growth. The second crop is borne in the fall on the new growth and is known as the main crop. Generally in the cooler Pacific Coast area only the *breba* crop ripens in late summer or early fall. The second crop does not ripen.

Cultivation Young fig trees should be watered regularly until they are fully established. Once established, figs should not need regular watering, unless in containers and then it should be tapered off as the fruit ripens to prevent it from splitting. Figs are not fussy about soil although good drainage is required. Figs grow best in soil pH between 6.0 and 7.8. If the soil has too much nitrogen, the tree will be lush with beautiful leaves but little or no fruit. Regular fertilizing of figs is usually only necessary for potted figs. Figs grown in containers will need regular low-nitrogen feeding from March until fall. As a rule, do not fertilize a fig tree if new growth is longer than half a foot. If growth is less than that, fertilize with blood meal or 10-10-10.

Winter care Fig trees or shrubs, grown in containers, have the advantage of being able to be moved to a warmer, sheltered area over the winter, especially since the soil in the container may freeze. Figs planted in the garden will survive temperatures to -10C. If Victoria experiences a cold snap to -15C, the branches could die back to the ground but will send out new shoots in the spring.

Pruning Figs grown in the Victoria area need to be pruned to control the height and spread of the tree to make the fruit easier to pick and to stimulate production of the *Breba* crop of figs, the only crop that will reliably ripen here. Pruning should be done when the tree is dormant, preferably in March to avoid bleeding

of sap. Figs can be grown as trees or as multibranched shrubs, although the shrub shape is easier to keep to 6 feet or less for easy picking.

To attain the shrub shape, the newly planted tree should be cut to 6 inches above the ground and 3 to 4 resulting shoots chosen as the framework. The goal is a multibranched framework with an open centre. Once the desired height is reached after 3-4 years, pruning to encourage fruiting and maintain size can begin. This year's Breba crop forms on previous year's wood. The figs, visible as tiny swellings are already forming on these branches in March and will start to grow larger in April, ripening in August or September. Therefore, these one-year-old branches should not be pruned.

To stimulate growth of branches that will produce next year's crop, cut back branches that bore fruit the previous year to within 1 inch of a permanent structural branch. These branches will be two years old and a darker grey- brown colour. One to four shoots will grow from the 1" stub below pruning cut during spring and summer. Next March, remove all but two or three of the strongest one-year-old shoots growing from the 1" stubbed branches to prevent crowding. These branches will bear the current year's crop. Pruning out dead and diseased wood can be done in winter.

Fig plants are usually propagated by cuttings in the early spring. Choose a 12-inch length of branch, less than 1 inch in diameter, with two-year-old wood at its base. Dip the cuttings in a rooting hormone and allow them to sit one week in a moist place at 50-60 degrees F. before planting in pots.

In Victoria, figs are seldom bothered by pests and diseases. Birds and wasps may sample the ripe fruit, but they can be deterred by nets or paper bags placed over the fruit. Coral spot fungus and botrytis may appear on frost-damaged branch tips. These branch tips should always be removed. Unripe fruit of the second crop should be removed when the leaves fall to prevent Botrytis rot.

Figs must be allowed to fully ripen 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. Figs can be dried in the sun for 4-5 days and 10-12 hours in a dehydrator. Dried figs can be stored for 6-8 months. Remove all immature figs that have not ripened after the main harvest, but do not remove the tiny embryos that form close to the ends of the branches. The embryos that survive the winter will turn into next year's fig crop.

#### Plant the Right Variety:

In Victoria, it is necessary to grow figs with a strong *breba* crop, which ripens in August. The second, main crop will not ripen here and should be removed. Root a cutting of a tree grown in Victoria and known to bear good fruit such as:

**Desert King** – the best variety for this area, as it has a large Breba crop. The fruit is green-skinned with strawberry-coloured flesh, delicious and good for drying. Ripens in August. Hardy, best adapted to cool areas such as the Pacific Northwest.

**Brown Turkey** – commonly available, but has a small Breba crop of purple -brown fruit with deep pink flesh and rich flavour.

**Brunswick** – large tree with highly indented leaves and very large fruit.

**Latterula** (also called White Italian Honey Fig) – medium sized greenish yellow fruit with honey coloured pulp.

**Black Mission** – purple-black fig that requires extra warm spot.

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New growth last year, will bear fruit this summer

Last years fruiting wood removed this March

Pruned last March



New growth last year, will bear fruit this summer

Last years fruiting wood, to be pruned to 1 inch from a structural branch