

FIGS - GROWING IN VICTORIA

OVERVIEW

While figs (*Ficus*) are native to the Mediterranean and Central Asia, they are fairly easy to grow in our climate **if planted in the hottest part of the garden.**

- **Figs grown in containers require** careful pruning for size, occasional root pruning, and more fertilizer than figs grown in the ground.
- **Figs grown in the ground** have root systems that extend beyond the leaf canopy, adding to drought tolerance, but potentially invading nearby beds.
- Most growers **can ripen the early or “breba” crop** of figs, but the second “main” crop seldom ripens here.
- Figs do not ripen further once they are picked so **leave them on the tree until perfectly ripe.**
- **Pruning is important to produce good yields** and maintain the size of the plant.



VARIETIES

- **Ripening** - Choice of an early-ripening variety is key to success. Varieties that have abundant first or “breba” crops are the most popular here.

Traditionally popular varieties include:

- Desert King (*Ficus palmeri* ‘Desert King’)
- Brown Turkey (*Ficus carica* ‘Brown Turkey’)

Numerous new varieties are also being tested locally with varying success.

- **Size** - No figs are on dwarf rootstocks, so all varieties can grow into large trees unless trained. Most fig trees in the Victoria area grow no taller than 3-5 meters (10-15 feet), but in warmer zones, fig trees can be 10 meters (30 feet) tall.
- **Hardiness** – Figs are Mediterranean plants. They are rated as hardy in Zone 8 (Victoria), but fruit ripening is dependent on the microclimate of the site where they are planted.

SITE

- A warm, protected site is best, particularly against a wall.
- Figs require 6 hours of sunlight daily to ripen. Choose a south facing aspect.
- Protection against deep cold is essential.
- Container figs should be moved to sheltered spots and protected for winter.

SOIL/AMENDMENTS

- Soil should be loose enough to drain well.
- Regular fertilizing is only required for figs in containers.
- Figs in containers require low-nitrogen fertilizer from March until Fall.

FIGS - GROWING IN VICTORIA

WATERING

- Figs require water during dry spells for the first 3-4 years.
- Trees planted in-ground are drought hardy once established.
- Container figs must be watered regularly throughout life.
- As figs near ripening, reduce watering frequency to prevent fruit from splitting.

WINTER

- **Frost Tolerance** - Figs planted in-ground can tolerate -10C. Temperatures colder than minus 10C may result in branches dying back, but roots can survive.
- **Containers** - Container figs should be moved to a warmer, sheltered area during cold months.
- **Remove Unripe Fruit** - Unripe Second or “Main” crop figs should be removed in winter to prevent disease. Take care **not** to remove tiny First or “Breba” crop figs that are developing.

CROPS

- **First or “Breba” Crop** – the first crop of the season grows on the previous year’s wood and is called a breba crop. In Victoria, the breba crop is likely to ripen between July and September.
- **Second or “Main” Crop** - The second crop that forms on the current year’s wood may ripen after mid-September in very hot locations but may not ripen at all in our area.
- **Picking** – Figs should not be picked when unripe – they must be picked when fully ripe, as they will not ripen well off the tree. They should be used soon after picking, whether eating, drying or freezing.
- **Determining Ripeness** – Do not judge ripeness by color as many green figs are perfectly ripe. Ripe figs will droop on their stems and the skin will feel thin. The skin may crack when ripe. The opening at the bottom of the fruit will become larger and may drip juice. The fruit will feel soft but resist the temptation to squeeze them as they bruise easily.

PRUNING

No figs are on dwarf rootstocks, so all varieties will grow into large trees unless pruned. This is particularly important for figs in containers.

For an excellent pruning tutorial, see the Bob Duncan YouTube [video](#) in the Bibliography.

a. PRUNING FOR HEIGHT/SIZE

- **When** - Keeping figs to a manageable size should be done when they are dormant – usually March in our area.
- **New Trees** – New, young trees should be cut to 15cm (6 inches) in height to encourage branching. Once shoots form, choose several as the framework. The goal is a multi-

FIGS - GROWING IN VICTORIA

branched framework with an open center. Once the desired height is reached after 3-4 years, pruning to encourage fruiting and maintain size can begin.

- **Height** - Established trees should generally be pruned to under 2 meters (6 feet) to keep fruit within easy reach.
 - Trees with higher branching offer more protection from deer.
 - Figs can be topped.
 - Cutting too much off a tree will cause a flush of new growth.
- **Shape** - Figs are best trained to be a shrub with multiple low branches rather than a tall central leader - unless training a higher-branching form to prevent deer damage. Training figs into a fan shape against a wall is popular.



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

FIGS - GROWING IN VICTORIA

b. PRUNING FOR FIRST("BREBA") CROP

- **Important Note** - Keeping track of whether your branch is last year's wood, this year's wood, or old wood is important when pruning figs.
- **When** - Pruning should be done in March during dormancy, and generally should be done to encourage production of the first crop because the second crop is unlikely to ripen.
- **What To Cut** -
 - Prune out anything that is dead, damaged or diseased.
 - Cut out older wood that did not bear figs the previous year to 2.5cm/1 inch from a structural branch. This older wood will be gray/brown and will not have immature first-crop figs budding on it. This pruning should cause several shoots to grow. When shoots appear, remove weaker ones, leaving 2-3 of the most vigorous.
 - Tiny first-crop figs will be visible on the last year's stems while the tree is dormant. Do not remove these branches as they will bear your first crop.
- **Root Pruning Figs in Containers** -
 - Figs should be removed from their pots and root pruned every 2 years at least to prevent roots circling the pot.
 - Reducing the root ball and cutting across any circling roots will help keep the fig small and ensure good root development.
 - Soil can be refreshed at the time of root pruning.

PESTS

- **Deer** – Fencing the tree or pruning the tree to encourage higher branching can help prevent deer damage.
- **Raccoons/Squirrels** – Any means of preventing them from climbing the tree may help. Electric fencing or metal flashing of the trunk may work. Pruning to encourage higher branching will enable the trunk to be protected from climbing.
- **Birds/Wasps** - Netting the tree or bagging the fruit may be required to keep birds and wasps away.

PROPAGATION

- Figs are propagated by cuttings taken in early spring. The best candidates are 25cm-long branches about as thick as a thumb that have two-year-old wood at their bases.
- Don't bother to plant the fig fruits in hopes of a tree, as the fruit is generally sterile.

DISEASES

- Coral spot fungus and botrytis can affect frost damaged branch tips. Damaged branches and shriveled, unripe main crop fruit should be removed after leaf fall to prevent Botrytis rot. Do not remove tiny first-crop embryos that will form close to the ends of branches.

FRUIT PRODUCTION PROBLEMS - Sometimes fig trees don't bear fruit. The causes are many:

- Improper pruning – removal of immature first crop figs when pruning

FIGS - GROWING IN VICTORIA

- Fertilizer Issue - Too little phosphorus, potassium, or nitrogen can prevent fruiting. Excess nitrogen may cause leafy growth instead of fruit
- Too much or too little water
- Insufficient sunlight
- Frost damage
- Transplant shock
- Wrong cultivar for our climate
- Chemical exposure – windblown spray herbicides or other chemicals can affect production
- Anything that stresses the tree can affect fruiting

FUN FACTS

- Figs are not fruit – they are inflorescences – a cluster of flowers and seeds.
- Some figs, such as *Calimyrna*, have dead wasps inside. The tiny female fig wasp climbs into the little hole at the base of the fig and pollinates it. The fig varieties grown in North America are parthenocarpic (**self-fertile**) and won't have dead wasps inside.
- Figs are among the oldest domesticated fruits, dating back over 11,000 years – even before olives or grapes. They are mentioned in the Bible and other ancient texts.
- The Fig Newton cookie was first made in 1891 by the Kennedy Biscuit Company which later merged with Nabisco, named for Newton, Massachusetts.

REFERENCES:

1. Bob Duncan – Fruit Trees and More <https://fruittreesandmore.com/figs.html> Fruit Trees and More
2. Bob Duncan – How to Prune Figs in a Cool Climate for First (Breba) Crop Production https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB0D_tuKgtQ
3. Canadian Figs - <https://canadianfigs.ca/no-figs/#:~:text=A%20lack%20of%20essential%20nutrients,tree%20and%20affect%20fruit%20production.>
4. Ecological Society of America – blog May 2011 <https://www.esa.org/esablog/2011/05/20/the-story-of-the-fig-and-its-wasp/#:~:text=That%20is%2C%20a%20fig%20is,navigate%20within%20these%20confined%20quarters.>
5. Harvard Magazine Jan/Feb 2007 <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2007/01/figs-were-first-html>
6. Master Gardeners of BC - <https://mgabc.org/article/pruning-tall-fig-tree>
7. North Carolina State University Extension <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/ficus-carica/>
8. Oregon State University Extension - <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/dont-be-fooled-figs-grow-fine-western-oregon>
9. Rick Shory - <https://rickshory.wordpress.com/2019/11/13/growing-figs-in-the-pnw/#:~:text=Summer%20pruning%20can%20also%20increase,buds%2C%20far%20above%20reach%20height>
10. The Cambridge Historical Society <https://historycambridge.org/candy/nabisco.html>