

# Figs (*Ficus carica*)

**Exposure:** Sun. Zone 7 - 10. Protect figs from winter winds; place them in a south-aspected location.

**Soil:** Best grown in moist and well-drained soils, though figs are quite drought tolerant once established. Avoid poorly-draining winter soils. Add organic matter to the soil if necessary to break up heavy soils.

**Growth habits:** Heat and drought tolerant, will reach 10 to 15 feet at maturity, but can be maintained at around 6 feet with regular pruning. Figs are stem hardy to around 10 degrees F and root hardy to -20 degrees. They grow quite well at lower elevations in the Southern Appalachians. Self fertile.

**Landscape uses:** Figs are beautiful shrubs with a distinct leaf pattern, few pests or disease problems, and delicious, alluring fruit. Because of their preference for warmth, they are excellent plants to put against south-facing walls of every kind. Protect from winter winds.

**Edible/Medicinal properties:** Figs produce abundant, sweet fruit that can be purplish, dark brown, green, or yellow when ripe. After a mild winter, fruit production begins in late June; otherwise expect a fall fruit crop.



## Caring for your fig plants

**Pruning:** We recommend removing the apical buds from fig plants as each branch gets 4-6 leaves. This will create a plant that is more compact and bears more fruit. For a demonstration of this technique, see the video on the UPN website.

**Watering:** A fig tree will likely need to be watered once or twice a week during its first year. The water requirements decrease as the root system becomes established.

**Fertilization:** Only fertilize your fig when it is planted and if it appears to need fertilization, especially if it died back over the winter. Too much fertilization will decrease fruiting.

**Winter protection:** In areas where the temperature falls below 10 degrees F, the fig plant will benefit from winter protection. See the Useful Plants Nursery website at [www.usefulplants.org](http://www.usefulplants.org) for videos showing several methods of winter protection for fig plants.

## Frequently asked questions about figs

My fig tree is a couple of years old and hasn't fruited yet. What might be wrong?

**Lack of phosphate:** All plants need phosphate to make fruit and the phosphate has been depleted from our Southeastern soils through careless farming practices in the past. Phosphate travels slowly in the soil, so it needs to be put in the ground with the plant roots. If you didn't incorporate phosphate into the planting hole when you planted the fig (or if someone else planted it and you don't know whether it has phosphate or not), you can mix some rock phosphate with a little compost, and then make holes around the edge of the plant root zone with a piece of rebar or sturdy screwdriver, and then fill the holes with the phosphate/compost mixture.

**Too much fertilizer:** A fig tree that is fertilized might not feel the need to reproduce and make fruit. Once the fig is planted, it shouldn't need to be fertilized unless it is regrowing after dying back during a cold winter.

Insufficient pruning: Figs fruit more directly below a branch. To encourage branching and fruiting, pinch off the apical bud of each new branch as it gets to be about 6". See the video on this technique on the UPN website.

My fig tree has droopy leaves. Why is that?

Droopy leaves are a sign of stress. The most common causes of stress are overwatering or underwatering. Stress can also be caused by pests, such as root nematodes or critters, damaging the roots or stems.

My fig tree was mowed down or my fig tree froze in the winter. Will it grow back?

A fig tree with established roots will probably grow back, even if the top of the tree dies. Establishing the root system takes a couple years, so it pays to give it some protection when it's newly planted. You can give it some fertilizer as it's growing back.

The fruit on my fig tree never ripens. I'd really like some figs.

Most varieties of figs take longer to ripen than our growing season, especially in the mountains. UPN selects varieties that will ripen in a shorter growing season. Some fig varieties fruit on both the old and new wood. Extra care to keep the old wood from freezing in the winter may reward you with an early fig crop, before the main crop is ready.

When do fig trees flower?

Fig trees don't have visible flowers.

### **Additional information**

See the Useful Plants Nursery website at [www.usefulplants.org](http://www.usefulplants.org) for videos demonstrating planting and other plant care techniques.