

HOME GROUNDS FACT SHEET



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
Nassau County



Horticulture Center
Demonstration & Community Gardens
at East Meadow Farm
832 Merrick Avenue
East Meadow, NY 11554
Phone: 516-565-5265

Fig Culture in Northern Climates

Many gardeners know there is nothing quite so delicious as a fresh-picked, ripe fig. Extra efforts are usually needed to grow figs in this area, but fig lovers feel it's worth it.

Temperature

Warm day and night temperatures are conducive to the development of the best quality fruit, so fig growing would be more successful in the southern parts of the state. A location with a warm southern exposure free from late spring frosts is desirable.

Soil

Limestone soils fairly heavy in texture but well drained are most suited to fig growing. Excessively light soils are not adapted to this fruit, but can be improved by the addition of organic matter such as compost or peat moss.

Propagation

If you can't get trees from your nurseryman and you can obtain cuttings locally, it is possible to propagate them from cuttings. They are taken from the tree in the spring when it is uncovered from winter protection or in late spring/early summer. The cuttings (5" to 10" long, severed at the nodes) are planted so the tips are almost even with the soil surface. By November, the cuttings should have developed a good root system. Hormone materials are available.

Planting

Container-grown plants can be transplanted without pruning. Tease the roots slightly before planting to encourage them to branch out in the hole. Fig trees must be covered every winter for protection. It is best to cut back heavily the first several years to produce a bush rather than a tree.

If you have purchased a bare root fig tree, prune off about 1/3 of its top if this was not done by the nursery. Remember that fig roots won't tolerate drying out; keep them moist when transplanting.

Pruning

You should encourage a bush form rather than a tree form for ease in maintenance and wrapping. Begin training to bush form at planting; cut back young plants to about half their height. This will force shoots to grow from the base of the plant. Let these grow through the first season. During the next winter after planting, select three to eight (depending on how large a plant you want) vigorous, widely spaced shoots to serve as leaders. Be sure the leaders you select are far enough apart so they can get fairly large (3"-4" diameter) without crowding each other. Remove all other shoots and prune the leaders.

Starting the second year after planting, you can prune trees each spring after danger of frost is past but before growth has started. Fruits are produced on the current season's growth, so keep this in mind when pruning new growth. Remove all dead wood and branches that interfere with leader growth. Cut out all suckers not needed for replacement of broken or damaged leaders.

Never leave bare stubs when you prune - these are entry points for decay. Make all cuts back to a bud or branch. Be sure to use sharp pruning tools.

Winter Protection

There are two methods: burying the tree or wrapping. If you decide to bury the tree, in the fall just before Thanksgiving, bend them over and peg them down to keep them in position. Any leaves, figs or dead wood should be removed. The tree should be covered with soil, leaves or compost so all wood is protected with a three to four inch layer. A two to three inch mulch of straw may also be applied.

If you decide to wrap, usually around Thanksgiving when all leaves and fruits are off, tie the branches of

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each fig tree together. Just before tying, some selective pruning can be done. All side branches are pulled inward so they form a vertical pattern rather than branching out as they do naturally. They are tied tightly in this position. It requires a strong person to pull the branches together. Be sure to use strong but soft rope; the branches could snap back if the rope breaks.

About the first week in December, wrapping begins. Choose a clear, dry day when it has not rained for a few days to be sure the trees and ropes are dry. Once wrapping is started, it must be finished the same day. First, the trees are wrapped with burlap from top to bottom. Make sure the burlap covers the tree completely.

To keep the burlap from falling off, pin or nail it fast, but not to the tree. Use the pins or nails as a tailor would use pins to fasten fabric. Then wrap the tree with heavy brown paper and tie it in place. Also remove some soil from just around the tree.

Then surround the bottom half of the tree with cardboard. For this purpose, save any large, utility size cardboard boxes. Cut them to fit completely around the tree and tie them in place.

Tar paper is next. Place it all around the tree in shingle fashion so water runs down the tar paper rather

than inside. It is extremely important that water does not seep into the cracks. The tar paper must be tied securely.

After the tree is completely wrapped, mound soil around the base to further protect it from cold air. Some people put a pail on the top of the tree. Whatever you do, never use plastic for wrapping any part of the tree!

In the spring, on a cloudy day after danger from frosts is over (usually mid-March), the winter protection should be removed. The earlier the covering can be removed, the greater the possibility that the fruit will mature properly. If the covering is removed too early, however, there is danger the figs will be killed by spring frost.

Fertilization

Fig trees grow best when a constant moisture supply is available. Mulching the bush with organic material is a good practice. Organic materials will provide some nutrients for the growth of the tree. A moderate application of 5-10-5 or 5-10-10 fertilizer can also be helpful. Don't overfertilize.