

Figs

(*Ficus carica*)

Cultivation notes

Large shrubs or small trees grown for their succulent fruit and beautiful architectural foliage. They thrive in the garden, in a container, in glasshouses or trained against a wall.



Pennard
Growing the Dream

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Quick facts

Common name: Fig

Botanical name: *Ficus carica*

Group: Shrub or tree

Flowering time: Sporadic

Planting time: Spring or autumn

Height & spread: 3m (10ft) by 4m (13ft)

Aspect: South or west-facing, sheltered

Hardiness: Fully hardy

Figs come from warm, Mediterranean climates and will thrive in a sunny and sheltered position with well-drained soil.

- Although figs can cope with dry conditions, drought can cause fruit to drop prematurely. Water plants regularly during the summer season, but do not give them too much or water them erratically while the fruit is ripening, as this may cause the fruit to split.
- Feed in early spring by spreading 70g (2oz) of a balanced granular fertiliser (such as Fish, Blood and Bone) over the ground, and cover with a thin layer of well-rotted manure. When the fruit appear, feed weekly with a high-potassium liquid plant food (such as tomato fertiliser).

Winter protection

- Even though most figs are hardy down to -10°C (14°F), the tips of branches that carry fruit are vulnerable to frost and a potential crop can be ruined during cold weather.
- Protect figs in very bad winters by covering the bare branches with a few layers of horticultural fleece, Remove the fleece by the end of May.

Cropping fruit

- In tropical regions (and under glass) figs bear three flushes of fruit, in Mediterranean areas they crop twice, but outdoors in the UK and other cool temperate regions they only usually produce one useable crop a year.
- In late spring you will notice embryonic pea-like fruits that will swell over the summer months until ripe and ready for picking, usually in late summer or early autumn.
- You can tell when figs are ripe and ready for harvesting by giving them a gentle squeeze to see whether they are soft. Splits appearing near the stalk end or a drop of nectar appearing at the bottom of the fruit are signs that they are ready.
- Sometimes, in late summer after fruiting, a second crop of embryonic fruit appears. These are unlikely to either ripen this late in the season, or to survive until the following year so can be removed.

Planting figs

- Figs give the best quality and quantity of fruit when roots are restricted. Plant in John Innes No 3 with 20 percent extra grit by volume , if planting in pots
- You can grow figs in a bed, or against a wall, just make sure you restrict the roots.

Pruning and training

- Figs can be either grown as standard trees, bushes (including those grown in pots) or trained as a fan against a wall.

Open grown figs

- Aim for a balanced open crown that allows light into the centre of the canopy. Prune at three key times of the year:
 - Early Spring (Jan / Feb) : remove any branches that spoil the shape, or which are crossing or damaged, along with any suckers appearing from the ground
 - **Summer:** pinch out the new growth at five or six leaves
 - **Autumn:** remove any large figs that have failed to ripen, and remove the pea-sized embryonic fruit
- If a fig has not been planted to restrict the roots, the growth may be extremely leggy resulting in poor fruiting. Overgrown plants can be rejuvenated by pruning out a number of branches over two or three years (in February), until a satisfactory shape has been achieved.
- Always leave 5cm (2 in) long stubs when removing any branches.
- Figs produce fruit on new wood, so plants which are not fruiting well or producing only a few fruits at the ends of the branches can be hard pruned to promote new fruits, but only perform this pruning during the winter period (Jan/Feb) as figs 'Bleed' at any other time.
- Please note, the sap can be an irritant to skin, particularly in strong sunlight.

Fertilizing

- One thing that makes fig trees so easy to grow is that they rarely need fertilizer. In fact, giving a fig tree fertilizer when it doesn't need it can harm the tree. A fig tree that gets too much nitrogen produces less fruit and is more susceptible to cold weather damage. Figs are naturally slow-growing trees, and giving them fertilizer can cause growth spurts that result in splits and cracks in trunks and branches.

When to Fertilize Figs

- A general-purpose fertilizer with an analysis of 8-8-8 or 10-10-10 is fine. It's easy to overdo it with stronger fertilizers.
- It's best to provide fertilizer for fig trees only when the tree shows symptoms of slow growth or pale leaves, You'll also need to fertilize fig trees that are surrounded by other plants that compete for nutrients.
- You also need to know when to fertilize figs. It's best to split the feeding over several months so the tree doesn't get too much nitrogen at one time. Feed one- and two-year-old trees an ounce of fertilizer a month, beginning when the tree starts to put on new leaves and stopping before the end of July. Give older trees one ounce of fertilizer per foot of bush height three times a year in late winter, mid-spring and mid-summer.

How to Fertilize Fig Trees

- If the fruit doesn't ripen properly, you may be over fertilizing. Reduce the amount of fertilizer to see if the problem resolves. Drought is another possible cause of immature fruit that doesn't ripen. Make sure the tree gets an inch of water a week, either as rain or irrigation, so you can rule out drought as the cause of the problem.
- Spread the fertilizer over the tree's root zone, Leave a space of at least a foot between the base of the tree and the fertilizer. Most of the feeder roots are around the tree's drip zone, (under the canopy) so use most of the fertilizer in this area. Water the fertilizer into the soil slowly so that it doesn't wash away.