

The Best Fig Trees to Grow in South Texas



Fig trees do especially well in South Central Texas, roughly south of a line from Houston to San Antonio to Del Rio, a fine area for growing edible figs, *Ficus carica*. As long as the garden soil is deep and fertile and has good drainage, many fig trees prosper.

Occasional frosts can nip back the branch tips of the trees, but figs produce their fruits from both year-old and new growth annually. According to Texas A&M University, you should choose "closed eye" varieties to prevent insect damage and to avoid premature fruit spoiling.

The fig is one of the oldest fruit crops known to man, and it has long been an important home fruit crop in the South. In the early 1900s, there was a 17,000-acre fig-processing industry on the Gulf Coast, which attests to the fruit's adaptability in the South. Figs can be grown as trees or bushes, depending on the way

they are propagated and pruned. What's of interest to the would be fig grower is that the unusual flower structure complicates the process of pollination. Bees, which are the pollinators we most rely on in the garden, can't reach fig flowers to pollinate them. Only one pollinator can do this—a small wasp, whose own life cycle further complicates the fig pollination process. The wasp must find a home for its young inside the fruits of a fig species known as 'Caprifig'. Caprifig, then, must be available in the vicinity of the edible fig tree so that wasps hatching from the caprifigs can enter the edible figs and pollinate the hidden flowers. (The wasps are actually laying eggs for the next generation and, in the process, are carrying pollen to the female flowers.) This process is referred to as caprifigation. Fortunately for the backyard fig grower, most fig varieties do not require pollination by wasps.

Varieties recommended for this area include (do not need a pollenizer to set fruit):

'Celeste' (Celestial, Blue Celeste, Honey Fig, Malta, Violette, Sugar Fig) is a small, dark and sweet high quality fig which ripens in mid June. Celeste fruit have a distinctive closed eye that prevents entry of the dried fruit beetle and on the tree spoilage. One of the most cold hardy of figs is 'Celeste'. It can be grown across much of eastern and northern Texas, as well as South Texas only if it is watered well during the long, hot summer months, according to Ashton written up in Texas Gardener magazine. The fruits of 'Celeste' are rather small with a bronzy, purplish skin and a pink-amber flesh. The tree is moderately vigorous and very productive. It is a good fresh eating fig and is also excellent for preserving purposes.

'Texas Everbearing' If you love eating fresh figs, 'Texas Everbearing' will produce two crops annually, midsummer and again in late fall. Medium- to large-sized figs feature yellow-green skin and a strawberry pink flesh that is sweet and rich, but not so much as those of 'Celeste.' 'Texas Everbearing' is particularly resilient to drought, making it perfect for areas of South Texas near the Rio Grande. Texas Everbearing is a medium-large, pear shaped fig with copper brown skin and yellow flesh. It ripens in late June. The tree is very vigorous and produces over a long period of time. The fruit has a relatively closed eye that prevents premature fruit spoilage.

'Alma' is a high quality fig that is extremely productive and ripens in late June. The tree is moderately vigorous, comes into production at an early stage and produces extremely heavy crops. Variety 'Alma' was developed by Texas A&M and released into the nursery trade in the mid 1970s. The fruits are rich and sweet in flavor, with golden brown skin and an amber-tan flesh. Richard Ashton wrote in an online article for Texas Gardener that 'Alma' is a little tender to winter frosts when young and also benefits from some pruning to keep it growing nicely and remaining productive with fruits. Alma is a recent release of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station. The fruit eye is closed by a drop of thick resin that inhibits on-the-tree fruit spoilage.

'Brown Turkey' (Aubique Noire, Negro Largo, San Piero) An old time favorite French fig from Provence, 'Brown Turkey' is a medium-small fig with a violet-brown skin and reddish-amber colored pulp. The fruit are tear-drop shaped. The pulp has a very sweet but not too rich taste, not quite as rich as 'Celeste.' It has a small, nearly closed eye

have an exceptionally cold winter and the plant gets killed to the ground, the plant will probably grow back and may even produce a crop the same year. It produces two crops a year with good cultural conditions, one in late May-June and another in late September to early November. It has a broad-spreading tree shape. The leaves have five lobes as opposed to the three-lobed leaves of many figs.

'Black Mission' (Beers Black, Franciscan, Mission) As long as your part of South Texas has a mild winter, 'Black Mission' makes an exceptional fig tree choice. It, too, yields two crops of figs annually--early summer and late fall, according to Ashton. The tree bears large-sized figs of purple-black. The pink flesh has a rich taste and is tasty eaten fresh or dried. 'Black Mission' trees are not overly cold hardy, and since they are known for vigorous growth, may sustain winter branch die-back after frosts in the interior of South Texas. (Semi-open eye)

'Blue Giant' is worth growing in South Texas since it produces huge fruits. The purple skin and amber flesh taste sweet. It handles almost desert-like summer conditions and will yield fruits, provided irrigation prevents the soil from becoming too dry. In South Texas' long growing season, it's possible to get two fruit crops annually.

'LSU Purple' This variety was introduced by the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station in 1991. The figs are medium in size (1.75-2.5 inches long); weight ranges from 20-30 grams (15-20 fruit per pound). The fruit is long turbinate, with a distinct neck. The skin is glossy, varying from reddish to dark purple, depending on light exposure and ripeness. LSU Purple figs check when ripe, exposing the white flesh beneath. The pulp is light strawberry when ripe. The flavor is good, mild, not "figgy," and the sugar content, which varies with the weather, is high in ripe fruit. The tree is vigorous, upright growing and has above average resistance to leaf diseases. Ripe fruit of good quality may be produced on young trees even in the nursery row, whereas many common figs have a definite juvenile period of four or five years before bearing edible quality figs. Fruit quality will improve on four- and five-year-old trees. Trees of LSU Purple five years or older show a tendency to produce three distinct crops: a light breba crop in early spring, a heavy main crop in the summer and a later crop often lasting into December. LSU Purple has poor cold resistance and is recommended only for south Texas.

'Kadota' The commercial variety in California. It is also called Florentine, Honey Fig and Dottato. This is a variety mainly for coastal areas of South Texas. It is a high quality fig with greenish-white skin and amber pulp. The pulp is rich and sweet. This is the common canned or dried fig of commerce. It requires heat to develop its best flavor. The eye is open but it is filled with resin that prevents damage from insects and fruit spoilage. It takes two years to recover from being killed to the ground. The fruit becomes rubbery in very dry, hot areas.

Planting and Caring for Your New Fig Tree

Figs are relatively tolerant of a wide range of soils, thriving in fairly heavy clays as well as in loose, sandy loams. Soils from slightly acid to very slightly neutral will support them. Plant your tree immediately after acquiring it. Choose a location that receives full- or mostly-sun and does not stay permanently wet. Space fig trees 12 to 20 feet apart. Fig trees survive better if set 2 to 4 inches deeper than they were grown in a nursery. Cut them back at the time of transplanting. This "heading back" helps to promote development of lateral branches and helps to reduce water loss from the above-ground portion. Remove any broken or dried roots. Dig a hole deeper and wider than necessary for the root system. Place the tree upright at the proper depth. Begin filling the hole with topsoil since it works best around the roots. After planting, water the tree to settle the soil firmly around the roots. If conditions are extremely dry, watering before the hole is completely filled will be beneficial. Trees should be kept free of weed competition, and moisture should be constantly available. A deep watering about every 10 days is recommended where summers tend to be dry. Once growth has begun, an early spring application of a complete fertilizer may be made, or the trees may be kept mulched with compost. High nitrogen applications should be avoided. Excessive nitrogen levels can cause figs to split and become watery tasting, and the trees will be more susceptible to winter damage.



Training and Pruning

Pruning should be minimal once the tree's main structure is formed. Commercially, young trees are pruned at about two to three feet from the ground, which causes the tree to develop its first branches at about that height. Fig trees make attractive espaliers grown along a trellis against a south-facing wall. Normally, figs are pruned very little. Mature Celeste and Alma trees should not be pruned since this will reduce the crop size. Mature Everbearing varieties will produce a fair crop following heavy winter pruning or freeze damage. Dehorning figs encourages rapid growth and will increase water stress.

Figs can be trained to a single trunk usually called a patio tree, open vase type tree or to a multi trunk bush. The bush

can only be used along the coast. Older trees that show little growth each year should be thinned out to stimulate new growth. This will also increase fruit size. The trees should be pruned enough to stimulate approximately one foot of growth each year. All weak, diseased or frozen limbs should also be removed each dormant season. Frozen limbs should be thinned out after damage becomes obvious in late spring.

Mulching and Fertilization

Organic mulches such as grass clippings, hay, or pine needles are extremely important in growing healthy fig trees. Mulch the tree 12 inches deep. The mulch will insulate warm soil temperatures in the winter and prevent the crown of the tree from freezing. It will also conserve soil moisture, cool the soil, and control weeds during the growing season. The decomposing mulch will slowly add nutrients to the soil. Commercial fertilizers are not needed on figs.

Pests

Figs have very few pests. They normally do not require any spraying and can be grown completely "organically". The two most common pests of figs are nematodes, small microscopic worms that feed on the root system, and fig rust, a fungus disease that causes premature defoliation. Birds are also known to enjoy figs.

'Nematodes' are small microscopic worms that are a universal fig problem. Figs seldom are without nematode infestations. They feed on small roots, reducing movement of nutrients and water within the roots. For this reason, figs should receive optimum moisture management. To prevent or delay the onset of nematodes, always use stem cuttings –not suckers—for propagating new plants. Never plant figs in an old garden site that may contain nematodes. Always inspect the roots of new plants to insure they are not infected with nematodes (small knots).

Harvesting

Harvest figs as soon as they are ripe (soft and purple). They will not ripen further after being picked. Wear a long-sleeved shirt when harvesting figs as the foliage may irritate your skin. If overripe fruit remains on the bush for more than a day, birds, dried fruit beetles, and spoilage will claim the crop. Never drop spoiled fruit under the bush because they will also attract more insects.



Climate and Soil

Though the fig grows best south of Interstate 20, it can be grown in any sunny location in the South. The tree is frost sensitive and can receive occasional injury in all southern areas. If growth does not slow significantly in the fall, early freezes can damage or kill the tree.

However, mature bushes that are fully dormant can endure temperatures as low as 10 degrees F. with little damage. In colder areas, trees should be planted on the south side of buildings.

Most southern soils will grow healthy fig trees. Figs grow in sands or clay, high or low Ph, and moderately drained soils. They are relatively salt tolerant and can be grown in the Southwest or along the coast near brackish water.

Severe Freezing Weather Expected

As all figs are semi-tropical in nature and young figs are especially susceptible to freeze damage. Place liberal quantities of mulch around the newly planted tree and cover this mound with 6 mil plastic. Pine needle straw, compost, grass clippings, hay, etc. all make good mulches. If a severe freeze is expected, cut back entire fig tree or bush to a manageable 18"-24" from soil line. Cover the entire plant with mulch, a box, and/or a blanket. If severe prolonged cold front situations, prune to 1-2 feet above ground, wrap incandescent Christmas light around stems (to be plugged in during the temperature drop below 32 degrees F), then cover with a blanket and 6 mil plastic to insulate it from cold. If the top of the tree does happen to freeze to the ground, it should return from the root system as long as the soil doesn't freeze.

More about figs can be found at:

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/extension/homefruit/fig/fig.html>