



## FIGS

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The fig (*Ficus carica*) is native to Western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean region. Cultivated for thousands of years, figs were first planted in California at the San Diego Mission in 1769.

### Fig Facts

- Figs are not technically fruit but are flask-shaped modified stems encasing numerous tiny flowers.
- There are hundreds of fig varieties which are classified into 4 types: Caprifig, Smyrna, San Pedro and Common.
- Smyrna and San Pedro types require pollination to produce edible fruits; Caprifig type is solely used as a pollinator tree. Common type does not require pollination.
- Fig pollination is a complex enterprise. It requires a caprifig type fig tree which serves to produce pollen. A fig wasp (*Blastophaga*) lives part of its life cycle in a caprifig and carries the pollen to other fig trees.
- Commercial fig growers plant caprifigs in their orchards to promote pollination.
- Figs from caprifigs are small, dry, nonedible fruit. Caprifigs can be found in the wild or in an urban setting, transported by a passing bird.
- Home gardeners typically grow the common type of fig tree, the type most commercially available.
- Some fig trees can produce two crops a year. A breba crop, in early summer, on previous years wood requires no pollination. All types produce a main crop, in late summer to early fall, on current season wood.



### Fig Types

1. Caprifig: For pollination only.
2. Smyrna: Requires pollination, no breba crop. Considered among the best for eating and drying. The cultivar most commonly grown here is Calimyrna.
3. San Pedro: Requires pollination for main crop. May have a breba crop which does not require pollination. The common cultivars in California are King (Desert King), Lampeira, and San Pedro.
4. Common: No pollination required and is most common type found in the home garden. Depending on the cultivar, may have a breba crop.

Common type fig varieties for San Luis Obispo County: Adriatic, Black Mission, Brown Turkey, Celeste, Flanders, Italian Everbearing, Osborn's Prolific, Violette de Bordeaux, White Genoa.

## **Culture**

- Things to consider: Figs are large trees, 10-30 feet tall and wide. Grow where there is space but growth can be limited by pruning. They are deciduous going dormant in the winter, tolerating temperatures down to 12-15 degrees. To produce the best crop, figs require prolonged summer heat.
- Planting choices: in coastal areas consider planting next to a south facing, light-colored wall for increased heat. Figs can be espaliered against a wall or fence or grown in a large container such as a half wine barrel or 15-gallon container. White Genoa variety is a good choice for cool coastal climates with fruit ripening through Fall.
- Plant when trees are dormant. In locations without hard freezes, trees can be planted from Fall to early Spring. Plant in full sun and the warmest location in your yard. Figs will tolerate most soil types from sand to clay.
- Fig trees are not grafted on a rootstock so plant as usual for a tree at same depth as in container.
- Figs are easily grown from cuttings which are planted once rooted.
- Irrigation: Figs generally don't need a lot of water but consistent irrigation is important for young trees. For established trees, water every 1-2 weeks, in the summer, depending on soil type and temperature. Water every about every three days for potted figs. Apply mulch to retain moisture. Figs will drop their leaves if kept too dry.
- Fertilizing: Necessary only with sandy soil or potted trees. Excess nitrogen promotes excess leaf growth and causes delayed ripening and poor fruit quality. Can lightly fertilize dormant trees once in the spring.

## **Pruning**

- Fig trees are productive with or without pruning.
- Pruning can be done to control the size and shape of the tree and for improved air circulation. Modified central leader shape is typical.
- Pruning should be done in the dormant winter season. Trees will secrete an irritating sap if pruned in the summer.
- Fig tree bark is very sensitive to sunburn. Protect young trees or heavily pruned trees with exposed bark by painting the main limb and trunk with 1:1 mix of indoor latex paint and water.
- Overall, figs do not need to be pruned to thin canopy as a thick canopy protects the bark from sunburn.
- For trees that produce a breba crop which is borne on last season's wood, avoid heavy winter pruning and prune just after main crop harvested.
- Unlike most fruit trees, thinning out fruit is not necessary as it will not affect fruit size or flavor. Thinning fruit may help with crop production in cooler climates.

## **Harvesting**

- Figs don't ripen after they're picked.

- Clues to ripe figs: Figs increase in size and change in fruit color. Green figs will get paler and dark figs darker. The figs will droop on their stems and be slightly soft.
- Figs will keep 2-3 days in the refrigerator.

## Pests-Disease-Problems

Gophers: Gophers love fig tree roots; they can kill a half-grown tree. Consider planting in containers or plant a tree in the ground with a gopher wire cage and basket extending 2-3 inches above ground.

Birds: Use bird netting for young trees. For large established tree, get used to sharing.

Fig beetles: Scrape holes in figs and feed on fruit. A problem in Southern California. Trees can be protected with 1/4 inch netting. Bird netting will not work.

Fig mosaic virus: A non-fatal, non-curable disease that causes leaf mottling, leaf and fruit drop with reduction in fruiting. Avoid buying plants with deformed or yellow mottled leaves.

Fig rust: Causes leaves to turn yellow-brown with rusty spots on undersides. The leaves drop in late summer and Fall. Early infections treated with Neem oil. Prevent by removing fallen leaves from ground.

Split figs: Heavy rain during fruit development can cause figs to split.

Pest and disease management is primarily through prevention: choosing healthy fig plants, monitoring tree for damage and pests, and orchard sanitation including removal of mummified and fallen figs and leaves.

## References

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