

## Fig Tree Dreaming

By Susan Camp

It is Saturday afternoon and I'm sitting at my computer watching the snow swirl past my window. It's cold in my little nook at the top of the stairs, and I can't help daydreaming about springtime, in particular, about the fig tree I want to plant.

Fig trees, like hydrangeas and blue flag irises, conjure up summertime memories of visiting Grandma and playing among the twisting branches, while delicious cooking and baking smells drifted from the open kitchen window.

Edible or common fig (*Ficus carica*) came to North America from the Mediterranean region, although it probably originated in western Asia. Fig trees have grown in Virginia since 1669.

*Ficus carica* is a large shrub to small tree, reaching 10 to 30 feet in a height, with multiple branches and a spread of up to 20 feet. The so-called fruit is actually a hollow, fleshy structure called a syconium, basically, an inverted flower with an open "eye" at its apex. The crunchy "seeds" are undeveloped female flower parts. Varieties with a widely open eye are more vulnerable to infestation by dried fruit beetles, which carry yeasts that cause the figs to sour and become inedible.

The simplest way to obtain a fig tree is to ask a neighbor if you can take a cutting or dig up a root sucker. Plant the cutting or sucker in a prepared container or bed for a year, then move it to a permanent location in full sun on the south side and at least six feet away from a building, so it will have room to spread.

If you decide to purchase a fig tree, buy from a reputable nursery, and don't purchase a California variety. The species of figs that grow in our area are self-pollinating. California varieties must be pollinated by a specific wasp that cannot survive in our climate.

Although edible fig grows in USDA Hardiness Zones 6 to 9, it is susceptible to winter cold and should be protected from harsh winds. Fig will grow in almost any alkaline soil with a pH of 6 to 6.5 and good drainage. Plant a bare root fig tree in late winter to early spring. Don't fertilize when planting. When the tree is one to two years old, beginning fertilizing with a 10-10-10 fertilizer once a month during the growing season. Fertilize a mature plant in late winter and again in mid and late summer. *Ficus* is not drought tolerant, and will need at least one inch of water per week. Leaf wilting, yellowing, and drop are indicative of the need for water.

Most fig varieties require little pruning, other than removal of dead or diseased branches or to keep the tree to a desirable size. A fig tree damaged by winter cold should be pruned back to the ground and several new, healthy shoots selected to form new trunks. Fig has shallow roots and should be mulched to help retain soil moisture.

Many fig varieties yield two harvests each year: a small spring crop, called a breba, and the full summer crop of fruit. The ripe figs must be harvested daily, as they are perishable, and will quickly rot.

Popular varieties on the Middle Peninsula include ‘Celeste’ with small, sweet, light brown fruit and ‘Brown Turkey’, a medium-sized, bronze fig. Both varieties are good for fresh use and excellent for preserving.

Insect pests include root knot nematodes, microscopic worms that form galls on ficus roots and kill trees by preventing water and nutrient uptake. There is no cure. Plant new fig trees in areas free of root knot nematodes. Fig rust is a fungal disease that is worse in wet weather, causing leaf browning and drop. Products containing copper will help control fig rust.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-841 Tree Fruit in the Home Garden”; Clemson Cooperative Extension HGIC 1353 “Fig”; and Texas A&M System publication “Figs” contain information on growing *Ficus carica*.

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