

# Ray's Figs Ray's Figs

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### General Care

Q. When is it too late to order figs in the spring?

A. Most nurseries will ship container-grown plants ***in their containers***

whenever weather conditions allow, but will not ship bareroot plants after they begin leafing out in the spring. Check the nursery's catalog. In reality, however, bareroot figs can be shipped any time of the year when the weather allows. You simply strip the leaves from the plants if they have leafed out, wrap the roots in moist packing material and pack them in a plastic bag. When they arrive, the customer just needs to pot them up and stand them in a shaded, but bright area until they leaf out again.

Q. My Brown Turkey tree froze to the ground this winter. Suckers came up and are each about 4 to 5' tall and 1" in diameter. Should I cut off the dead trunk now or wait until fall?

A. Do NOT cut back the trunk until fall. By then your replacement shoots will have turned woody. Removing the old stem now may stunt or even kill the new shoots. I've done this several times and lost the plant about 50% of the time.

Q. A nursery shipped me an actively growing greenhouse fig in a little pot. They said I should harden it off. How do I do that?

A. Repot it in a larger container, place a 2-liter plastic bottle with the bottom cut out (lid on) over the plant, add 1 Tsp. of a slow-release fertilizer (or an appropriate amount of liquid fertilizer), water it well and stand it in shade. After three-four days remove the lid and put the plant in dappled shade (morning sun is fine) for a week. Then remove the bottle and a week after that you can plant it out or put it the pot in its permanent home.

Q. How does dry, hot weather effect figs?

A. This depends on a number of factors. In general, summer heat at its normal time—and with normal moisture conditions—is beneficial. A few varieties, however, such as Gillette, King, Genoa, and Green Ischia, are better adapted for cool summer areas. On the other hand, a long-lasting heat wave beginning in early summer, as experienced in the Southeast in 1998, can reduce or even eliminate the crops of some varieties, such as Alma, Celeste, Hunt, Kadota, Marseilles, and Tena normally well adapted to hot summer areas. Under the same conditions other varieties, such as Brown Turkey, Hardy Chicago, Conadria, Nero, and Sal's Fig will fruit close to normally.

Q. Some sources I've read say you should always prune back bareroot plants when you plant them. Is this true about figs?

A. Sometimes. How's that for a wishy-washy answer? It all depends on how good a root system the plant has. If it is big and looks healthy, don't bother with pruning. It might stunt the plant. If, on the other hand, it looks puny, prune the leader back to something that looks reasonably in balance with the root system. Use the

prunings for cuttings as insurance against loss of the plant. See Questions about propagating for tips on how to do this.

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## Cropping and Fruiting

Q. I have a fig tree that has borne fruit but not in the last several years. What should I do?

A. A number of factors may be causing the crop failures but I think the best solution is found in one Jesus' parables, **Luke 13:8** : Dig around it and fertilize it and give it a year to start producing. If it doesn't, replace it with another.

Q. How can I tell my figs are ripe?

A. There is an old Spanish proverb: A fig is ripe when it has a hangman's neck (droops), a mourner's eye (oozes honeydew from the eye) and a penitent's robe (skin tears). In practice, a drooping fig is a ripe fig.

Q. What does "caprification" mean?

A. Figs have complex sex lives. **Ficus carica** actually has two forms, the common fig and the caprifig. The edible, common fig has no viable male flowers and long-styled female flowers; the caprifig has viable male flowers and short-styled female flowers. These are important characteristics for pollenization in figs is carried out by the fig wasp, **Blastophaga psenes** . This little wasp can lay its eggs only in short-styled female flowers. An egg hatches into a larva, grows, and pupates—inside one flower. If it is a male it breaks out of the flower, finds a flower containing a female, eats its way in and mates with her. The female then emerges and leaves the caprifig fruit through the ostiole or "eye," covering itself with pollen from the male flowers which cluster around the "eye as it does, and flies off in search of another **Ficus carica** tree with fruit at a suitable stage for egg-laying.

The fig wasp cannot distinguish common figs from caprifigs (and neither can people without testing the fruit) and will enter either one if it has fruit at the right stage. If it enters a caprifig fruit it will deposit its eggs quite successfully. Fig wasps do it so well that the pollen they carry into the fruit is wasted for the wasps miss few if any female caprifig flowers. They produce another generation of fig wasps instead of seeds. If, on the other hand, the fig wasp enters the fruit of a common fig, it will pollenize the fruit, but fail to lay any eggs for its ovipositor is too short to place them in its long-styled female flowers. We call this process "caprification." Only figs that are caprifiged produce viable seed.

Q. Do figs need to be pollenized to produce fruit?

A. Maybe. There are three classes of figs. Common class figs will bear either one or two crops a year depending on the variety and weather conditions without pollination. Most figs grown by amateurs fall in this class. San Pedro class figs will bear an early crop (brebas) on last year's wood without pollination, but their main crops require pollination. King and Royal Vineyard are the most common San Pedro figs. Smyrna class figs require pollination to produce any figs at all. In nature, figs are only pollenized by the fig wasp, **Blastophaga psenes** which matures in the caprifig form of **Ficus carica** . The pollenization of figs is usually called **caprification**.

Q. My figs are hollow in the middle when harvested. What's wrong?

A. Probably nothing. Hollow centers are normal for some varieties.

Q. We have a 4 or 5 year old fig tree which we grew from seed. It bears many young figs but no mature fruit. They turn yellow and drop off before they ripen. What are we doing wrong?

A. The fig's weird sex life has got you. Fig seeds produce 50% inedible caprifigs and 50% edible figs. Fig reproduction also involves persistence and caducous traits. Almost all Smyrna-type figs (that's the kind that has viable seeds) are pollenized by caducous caprifigs. That's important because the pollen parent has to be persistent for ANY of the offspring to be persistent.

Your seed-grown tree is certainly caducous and will never produce fruit without pollenization. If you live in California this might be a solvable problem. [Get a caprifig.] Otherwise, sad to say, your best bet is to discard the seedling or use it as an ornamental. If you gotta have a few fruit, try puffing some air into the ostiole when the fruit just begins to size up (before it turns yellow). You might get a few that way. Be aware that the fruit might be caprifigs (usually not palatable), but who knows you might get lucky.

Q. My fig tree grows well and has lots of leaves but almost noo figs! Two last year, two the year before... What can I do?

A. There are three possibilities:

1. You have a variety that need pollenization. Unlikely since you don't mention tiny little figs dropping off.
2. Tree is still immature. Possible. I wouldn't recommend any fig variety for inland Virginia which doesn't bear on first year's wood.
3. Tree too vigorous or weedy. Likely. Stop fertilizing. If the plant is sending up a lot of shoots from the base, pull them off whenever you see them. I suggest having no more than 3 or 4 main stems. Induce branching by pruning. [July is a good time to do this.]

Q. My fig always has lots of unripe figs left when frosts arrive. Is there anything I can do to get more ripe figs?

A. When September rolls around you might think about **oiling** the ones that won't ripen on their own before frost. Oiling is easy. Take a toothpick and apply one drop of vegetable oil to the eye of each unripe fig. This is a practice developed by market gardeners growing fresh figs for the Paris markets 150 years ago. Some varieties like Hardy Chicago respond incredibly well to oiling. Virtually all of their oiled figs will ripen within a week.

Q. We here in Texas are plagued with Mocking Birds who love figs. I have been netting my tree and it works pretty well, but it's the devil to remove the net and you have to do it because the tree will grow through it and the figs will not be protected. If you have any ideas, please advise.

A. My solution is: **cats**. I encourage my six cats and the neighbor's cat to regard the fig planting as a second home. I give them cat treats and would probably feed them there if my wife would let me. I lose very few figs to birds.

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## Propagation

Q. Do figs come true from seed?

A. No.

Q How do you take cuttings?

A. The best way to do it is when you pruning your plants. Cut out crossing, inward-growing, and damaged branches and suckers. (Pull off suckers growing from the roots to save some roots.) Save pieces that are 6" long and cut longer pieces into 6-10" pieces. Make the bottom cut a straight cut just below a node and the top cut, if needed, a slanting cut just above a node so you can tell which end is up. Longer cuttings are okay. (The Turks prefer 36-48" pieces which they set very deep in the soil where they want a new tree.) Some 2-year old wood at the base of the cutting is very desirable.

Q. What is the best time of year to take cuttings?

A. Whenever the fig plant is NOT in a growth spurt. Early spring when buds are just opening, mid-summer and late fall when the leaves are dropping are very good times. You can start the early spring and mid-summer cuttings right away, but you will have to store the fall cuttings until next spring.

Q. How do you store cuttings over the winter?

A. Seal them in zip-lock bag right away. Don't wet the cuttings or place a damp paper towel or anything like that in the bag. You can dust them with a fungicide before you seal AND label the bag. I also like to dip the cut end in melted grafting wax. (Wax, not parafin which gets too hot.) Store them in the vegetable/fruit bin of

your refrigerator until the weather warms and danger of frost is past.

Q. How can I send cuttings to a friend/relative who lives far away?

A. Sure. No problem. Send them regular mail. Fig cuttings are good for about 2-3 months without refrigeration. Remember, don't wet them or stick damp stuff in the ziplock bag with them.

Q. A stem broke off my Black Jack and it is six inches long and a little thicker than a little larger than a pencil. It has started to leaf out. Can I use it as a cutting?

A. Sure. Pot it up per the instructions at the [Nafex fig page](#). It will almost certainly root and start to grow vigorously in 3-4 weeks.

Q. I am interested in breeding new varieties. Does Gillette have enough functional male flowers to use as a male parent?

A. Gillette does not produce much pollen, but Condit used it for his breeding program until he developed better edible and persistent caprifigs to use instead. Two of these caprifigs were eventually named: Enderud and Saleeb. Both are said to have good flavor and produce abundant pollen. I haven't tried them yet, but hope to do so soon.

Q. Can you cross-pollinate figs? If they're both self-fertile?

A. Nope. No, repeat NO, figs are self-fertile. Common figs bear fruit without pollenization. Their fruit never has viable seeds unless it has been caprifigged. In fact, figs do not even produce pollen. Yet, they are capable of being pollenized by **caprifig** pollen. (Caprifigs are the other form of *Ficus carica* ).

The ONLY way that figs get pollenized in nature is by the fig wasp,

*Blastophaga psenes* which requires a caprifig host. You can artificially pollenate figs with caprifig pollen by hand and people have done it to breed new varieties. See the [Weird Sex Life of Figs](#) for more detailed information.

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## Overwintering

Q. It's summer but I am worried about losing my fig plant to winter cold. What can I do?

A. Check out the info at [Nafex Fig Page overwintering](#) on protecting your fig plant from winter cold.

*The Fig Booklet* has more detailed info on this topic. (You can order a copy from me for \$6.00 at 2412 Low Ground Road, Guyton, GA 31312-5122.)

There is another insurance measure you can take NOW, if your plant has any suckers not in a growth spurt. Pull off (don't cut) a sucker and stick it in potting mix in a 3-qt container, water and cover with an empty 2-liter soft drink bottle with the bottom cut out. (Leave lid on.) Set in bright, but shaded area and wait for the sucker to start growing vigorously. This will give you a baby plant as a reserve against frost damage.

Q. Is it ok to overwinter a dwarf fig in a heated house?

A. It's okay, but better would be storing it in a shed where temperatures stay below 45 and above 20-25. Figs seem to need a bit of dormancy to make good growth and have a strong fruit set the following year.

Q. Is it OK if the tree is in a rather dim, rather cool garage in the winter, or does it need sun and warmth?

A. OK? It's exactly what it needs in the North. Don't overwater it. I hope and expect that your garage is not appreciably warmer than 40-45 degrees.

Q. What are the hardiest figs?

A. The hardiest figs in my own collection are Celeste and Sal's Fig. I have never noticed any winter damage on Sal's Fig and seldom any on Celeste. Other enthusiasts have told me that the Tennessee Mountain Fig seems

to be an even hardier sport of Celeste. Hanc Mathies has an Eastern Brown Turkey which he says is hardier than even Sal's Fig. Hanc lives on Long Island and has never noticed any winter damage on the E.B.T. It is (or will soon be) available from [Edible Landscaping](#).

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## Varieties

Q. Do you have any plants or cuttings available?

A. I do sell plants (but not cuttings). Just click on [Ray's Price List](#) for a list of available varieties, prices, etc.

Q. I am trying to extend my fig season. What are some good late varieties?

A. There are a number of late varieties, including Osborn Prolific, Panachée, Genoa, Ventura, Alma, and Flanders arranged in no particular order. In my experience, the latest ripening fig is Pasquale (Vernino) which often begins ripening well after first frost. The last of Osborn Prolific's fruit also ripens after first frost.

Q. I've heard there are two distinct varieties of Hardy Chicago. Is this true?

A. Some people have noticed a difference between the Hardy Chicago figs offered by Fred Born and by Edible Landscaping, the two chief promoters of the variety. I struck some cuttings from the 'Fred Born' strain and compared them with my "edible landscaping' plants. Sure enough they looked different, but less and less so as the season progressed. By the end of summer, I could not discern any difference as to leaf or fruit. I e-mailed Mike McConkey of Edible Landscaping and asked him about it. He explained that his Hardy Chicago came from Fred Born, but that he had used tissue culture to multiply his stock. The plants produced by this procedure may have juvenile leaves for several generations. There is only one strain of Chicago Hardy.

Q. I have a Mission fig and was wondering when to prune it and how much?

A. When your pruning shears are sharp. It really doesn't make much difference when. I wouldn't do anything except remove crossing and damaged limbs and suckers. If it is producing well don't mess with it too much. Thinning out the center to let more light in might be a good idea. Avoid leaving stubs by cutting back to major limbs.

There are some varieties of figs which do require regular pruning to produce good crops. These include Alma and California Brown Turkey (San Piero).

Q. What is the sycamore fig mentioned in the Bible?

A. The only information I have on it is that it is a close relative of *F. carica* and has edible fruit up to 2-2.5 cm long and weighing up to 15-20 grams. I have no info on its color. This fig is purely tropical and will not survive any freezing temperatures at all.

Q. I've heard that Alma (Fall Gold) needs pruning to be fruitful. How do you prune it?

A. Alma tends to be "weedy," that is it sends up a lot of suckers. You need to remove these two or three times a year. Eliminate spindly shoots as soon as they appear and Alma will be quite productive. Fail to do it and you will be lucky to harvest more than two or three figs per plant.

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## Container Plants

Q. I live in Iowa, where the winter is too cold for fig trees. I want to try growing a fig in a pot? Can I keep it small to bring it in and out every spring and fall?

A. Sure. No problem. The first year it should fit into a 3 gallon container. Prune back to main branches for winter (after leaves drop). Move up to 10 gallon container in 2nd year and 20-25 gallon container thereafter. Prune as needed.

Q. Do you think the brown turkey fig is a suitable variety for pot culture?

A. Probably. If you order from an Eastern nursery you will probably get a Celeste and not Brown Turkey. It is a wonderful fig--but only gives one crop a year. If you order your fig from a California nursery they will ship you a California Brown Turkey which is quite different from Celeste. It's good and it yields two crops a year. Almost all figs are suitable for pot culture. I grow some 80 varieties and ALL of them are in containers. Don't worry about it.

Q. I just got a fig plant by mail order. It is about 42" high. Is it too big to plant in a container?

A. Not at all. Use at least a 3-gallon and preferably a 5-gallon container. Make your own from 2 parts pine bark mulch, 1 part composted cow manure, and 1 part perlite. Give it a good dusting of ground limestone. Do NOT add any soil unless you're sure it is root-knot nematode free. Clay should be okay but sandy soil is not. Mix thoroughly (A synthetic potting mix from Walmart or a garden center will also do.). Pot the fig plant just like you would any houseplant and give it a thorough watering to settle the "soil." Top dress with a slow-release fertilizer like Osmocote. Some people prefer liquid fertilizers like Miracle Grow and there's nothing wrong with them.

Q. I have to grow my figs in containers since winters are very cold here but watering them everyday just doesn't fit in my lifestyle. Any ideas?

A. Of course I have ideas. (And some of them may even work.) Bury the container in the soil. The fig will get adequate moisture from the soil in humid climates, but hand watering or a drip line may be desirable in dry climates. In the fall before you get hard freezes below 25ø dig up the container, shovel pruning any protruding roots. This will help control the size of the plant. A 5 or 10-gallon container will be large enough for the life of the plant.

Q. Do I need to water my potted figs while they are in the winter storage?

A. I don't generally water my figs during winter dormancy— unless they get really dry. I don't think it would be a good idea to fertilize them either. When they start leafing out, resume watering and fertilizing them. I also suggest you set the figs outside on nice days so the leaves will green up properly and just bring them in at night. Be sure to harden them off properly if any leaves are more than half open.

Q. Do you have a particular recipe for container soil mixes?

A. 2 parts pine bark mulch, 1 part composted cow manure, and 1 part perlite. I give it a good dusting of ground limestone. I Do NOT add any soil and I don't recommend it. You can do it if you're sure it is root-knot nematode-free. Clay soils should be okay but sandy soils are not.

Q. How much fertilizer do figs planted in containers need?

A. I prefer slow-release fertilizers like Osmocote, preferably 14-14-14 with micronutrients in the 8-9 month formula. A good application rate seems to be 1« Tsp. for 3-qt containers, 3 Tsp. for 1 1/2 gal containers, 6 Tsp. for 3 gal containers, and proportionately more for larger containers. Figs like a lot of fertilizer, but you can overdo it. A good way to tell whether you are doing it right is to measure the distance between nodes (leaf joints) on new growth. You want fairly short internodes, say 2-3." If they are significantly shorter and the leaf color is yellow-green, the fig needs more fertilizer; significantly greater, be stingier with the fertilizer next year.

Q. Can you tell me if there is fig tree that I could grow in big clay pot and take indoors in the winter? I live in Zone 3 and would like to have a fig tree, even a small one.

A. Most fig varieties will thrive in pot/container situations, but some, such as Adriatic and Mission, are too vigorous. All of my collection of 80+ varieties is in containers. For your situation I would particularly recommend Brunswick, Gillette, King (Desert King), Lattarula, Marseilles, and Verte (Green Ischia). Osborn Prolific would also be worth trying although it does ripen late. Celeste, Brown Turkey, and Hardy Chicago might also work.

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## Diseases, Pests and Problems

Q. My indoor fig tree has some sort of tree sucker (scale?). What can I do?

A. My guess is scales. I suggest you take it outside in mild weather and spray it with a summer oil with an appropriate insecticide. Check for recommendations with your agricultural agent or master gardener. Remove all dead leaves and debris and burn them. Also, check any other houseplants in the house for the same scale. Treat them too.

Q. My fig's leaves are turning yellow and dropping off. What's wrong?

A. If you also notice reddish-brown spots, I would suspect fig leaf rust. There is no cure for it except sanitation. Pick up fallen leaves immediately and burn them. Spray new growth with Bordeaux mixture to prevent infection. If there are no spots, your figs are probably too dry. They need more water, more regularly. Figs do not like to dry out.

Q. Is it true that birds don't go after green fig varieties?

A. I don't know. I have so many cats, six at last count, that few birds are willing to risk a feeding visit to my fig plantings.

Q. Snails are devouring the new growth on my figs. What can I do?

A. Try spraying the area and foliage with "Measarol," a spray highly recommended in snail paradise, California.

Q. The Conadria I got by mail order is leafing out, but not vigorously. The leaves have a mottled appearance like a mosaic of light and dark shades of green. There are no pests infesting the plants. What is wrong?

A. There may have been a late frost at the nursery after Conadria had lost dormancy and that would have damaged some stem tissue on your plant. I suggest you judiciously prune it back to reduce the number of active growing points. Check the color of the bark tissue you prune. Green? Fine. You have cut enough. Brown or yellow-green? Damaged. Prune some more.

This pruning will force a vigorous sucker(s) from the root system or lower on the stem and that's desirable in your situation. Let one (or two) grow. I doubt the plant is diseased. The viral infection of Mosaic doesn't usually manifest itself until leaves are half-grown. After it appears though, it will show in all the leaves on the effected stem. New shoots may be Mosaic-free.

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## Literature and Recipes

Q. I've noticed that most of the literature on figs is really old—from the 1950s or even earlier. How can I get copies of this old stuff?

A. I only have xerox copies of them myself. Try your local library's InterLibrary Loan service. I got Condit's monographs through them. Also, the NAFEX Library loans materials by mail to Nafex members. They have copies of virtually everything on the mailing list. I got Gustav Eisen's book from the Nafex Library—and they now have a copy of Condit's stuff. Interested? See the [Nafex Library Page](#) for info on the library and a link for joining this fine organization of fruit enthusiasts.

Q. Do you know where I could get Condit's **Fig Varieties: A Monograph** ?

A. I got it through InterLibrary Loan, copied it at Kinkos, including color copies of the plates. The color quality of the photos is good, but no better than the originals. Condit's

**Fig Characteristics**

**Useful in the**

**Identification of Varieties**

also

has a page of color photos (of better quality).

Q. Do you have a recipe for preserving figs (condiment)?

A. **The Fig Booklet** has two recipes for fig preserves, but it is not a really good source for recipes. [The California Fig Growers Recipe Page](#) has a fine collection of dried fig

recipes and ideas for using dried figs, but I am sure you could substitute fresh figs for dried in many of their recipes.

Q. I live in South Africa. How can I get copies of the fig bulletins from the California Extension Service?

A. I suggest you use a good search engine like Yahoo or AltaVista to get URLs for the home pages of the various extension services. I know that Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Florida also have fig bulletins. The South African Agricultural Service in South Africa ought to have some materials too since figs are or used to be a minor crop there. Other fig- growing countries may also have literature available to growers.

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