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Fig

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Most people are fond of figs, (*Ficus carica*), and rightfully so. They are very tasty and can be eaten fresh, preserved, or used for baking and making desserts like ice cream. Figs can be grown successfully in most parts of South Carolina, with the mountain region being the exception.

PLANTING

The selection of the planting site is more important with figs than with many other fruits. Figs need at least eight hours of sun during the growing season. The south side of a building is a preferred site in the colder areas of the state, because it offers more protection from winter winds and cold temperatures than an open site or a site on the north side of a building. Reduce the chances of cold injury by planting the fig out of the early-morning and late-evening sunlight during the winter months. Plant them a minimum of 3 feet away from the wall.

In sandy soils, first test the site for root-knot nematodes. If they are present, the soil should be fumigated or amended with organic materials such as cladosan, which contains chitonase.

Plant figs before they break dormancy in the spring. Remove the top half of bareroot plants. Do not remove growth from container-grown plants. Set the plants 3 to 4 inches deeper than the soil line on the stem of the plant. Do not fertilize at this time. Allow the plant to grow unpruned the first season. At the beginning of the next growing season, select three to four strong shoots to serve as leaders. These shoots should be spaced widely enough to allow them to grow to a 3- to 4-inch diameter without crowding each other. Prune all other shoots to the soil level. Pruning then can be done on an annual basis, removing up to one-third of the growth. This pruning should be done after the danger of frost has passed but before spring growth has started. Remove any dead wood at this time.

PROPAGATION

Figs are easily propagated. Take an 8- to 10-inch cutting of year-old wood in early spring. The upper end should be cut just above a node and the lower end just below a node. Place this cutting in prepared soil, with just the upper node exposed. It is also possible to remove "sucker" plants, those arising from the roots of the mother plant, and transplant them. Another method is to cover low-hanging shoots with soil in the fall. Leave several inches of the tip exposed. In the early spring, remove and transplant the new plant. You can also purchase bareroot or container-grown stock.

CULTURE AND FERTILIZATION

Although drought tolerant, figs need 1 inch of water per week from rainfall or irrigation for good growth and fruit production. Annual applications of straw or other organic mulches to a depth of 4 to 6 inches is beneficial for moisture conservation and winter protection of potential replacement shoots near the root collar.

Figs require little to no fertilization. Heavily fertilized fig bushes are more prone to cold injury. If the fig bush is showing very little vegetative growth, apply about a half-pound of 10-10-10 fertilizer when growth begins in the spring.

HARVEST

Harvest figs for fresh consumption when their necks wilt and the fruit droops. If you notice a milky, latex-like material, the figs are not quite ripe. For preserving, harvest the figs a few days before maturity. The milky secretion can be irritating to some persons, so you may consider wearing rubber gloves as you harvest the figs. Picking the figs before they become overripe will lessen insect and disease problems. Birds may feed heavily on figs. Picking early in the morning will decrease bird damage. Netting is available to protect fig bushes from feeding by birds but is seldom practical.

PROBLEMS

Insects and diseases are rarely a serious problem on figs. Various wood-boring insects may attack weak or dying trees. Use good growing practices to keep the trees vigorous. Root-knot nematodes are the primary pest of fig trees in the Sandhills and Coastal Plain.

Growers are often concerned when their fig bush fails to set or ripen fruit, or the fruit drops prematurely. There can be several reasons for this. Figs have a long juvenile period and it may be three to four years before a bush sets a crop. Excessive fertilization can cause a plant to remain vegetative (growing bush) instead of setting fruit. Hot, dry weather can cause poor fruit production and quality. The cultivar Celeste will drop fruit prematurely regardless of how well the plants are cared for. In the lower areas of South Carolina, root-knot nematodes can affect fruiting. If the bush has never set a crop, it might be a California type that does not pollinate in this area. In that case, replace it with a rooted shoot from a known productive mother bush.

CULTIVARS

Cultivar selection is also very important in fig production. Brown Turkey and Celeste are the two most popular varieties in South Carolina. Brown Turkey will have a longer ripening season. This variety will also produce fruit in the summer, even if killed back to ground level the previous winter. Celeste is a little more cold-hardy and many people prefer it for eating fresh. Other varieties are available (see table below). The cultivar you select should be self-fruitful and not require cross-pollination. The so-called California cultivars must be pollinated by a small wasp that does not survive in our climate.

NOTE: Chemical control of diseases and insects on large trees is usually not feasible since adequate coverage of the foliage with a pesticide cannot be achieved.

Fig Varieties for South Carolina

Variety	Fruit Color	Fruit Size	Quality of Fruit	
			For Fresh Use	For Preserving
Alma	Greenish brown	Small	Very good	Good
Brown Turkey	Bronze	Medium	Good	Excellent
Celeste	Lt. brown to violet	Small	Very good	Excellent

Green Ischia	Bright green	Medium	Good	Good (seeds objectionable)
Hunt	Dull bronze with specks	Small to medium	Good	Excellent
Kadota	Bright greenish-yellow	Medium to large	Fair	Excellent
Magnolia	Bronze with white flecks	Medium	Fair	Excellent

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