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Specialist Says Figs Are Louisiana's Backyard Fruit; July Peak Harvest, Good Time to Think About Care

July is the peak month for harvesting of figs, and LSU AgCenter horticulture specialist Dr. John Pyzner says fig trees may be the "most popular backyard fruit tree grown in Louisiana."

"Figs can be found growing in every section of the state and in most soil types," Pyzner says, adding, "They are a low maintenance fruit, which can easily fit into an edible landscape."

To enjoy the most from your harvest and to help the trees survive year-round, there are a number of precautions - including proper watering and helping the tree be well prepared for winter - that should be taken, the expert says.

Pyzner explains the fig trees grown in Louisiana are different from those grown in California, since most California figs have male and female flowers and require pollination by the fig wasp, which does not live in the Southeastern United States. The figs grown in Louisiana and other southeastern states do not require pollination for the fruit to develop.

"Many of Louisiana's fig trees were obtained from friends and relatives since figs are easily propagated by layering and from cuttings taken in February," Pyzner advises. "Due to this ease of propagation, the variety names of many of our fig trees are unknown, and some of the older varieties have several different names."

Celeste, Southeastern Brown Turkey, Alma, LSU Purple and LSU Gold are good varieties to grow in Louisiana, the LSU AgCenter specialist says.

As for care, he says most fig roots are close to the soil surface and very susceptible to drying. Figs also are very susceptible to root knot nematodes, which destroy small roots, and, in turn, lead to reduced water movement into the trees.

"For these reasons, fig trees should be irrigated regularly as drought develops," Pyzner advises.

Slight leaf wilting in the afternoon is a good indication that a fig tree is suffering from water stress, according to Pyzner, who says mulching with straw or grass clippings can help maintain uniform soil moisture, reduce weed competition for available soil water and lessen the number of waterings.

"Water stress frequently causes premature fruit drop in some areas of Louisiana," Pyzner says. This is particularly true in such Louisiana-recommended varieties as Celeste and Southeastern Brown Turkey, which do not develop a true seed in the fruit. "This problem is very common in hot, dry periods where the fig is growing in shallow soil and the roots are heavily infested with nematodes."

On the other hand, the specialist cautions against over-watering in areas where there is poor drainage.

"This will force oxygen out of the soil, and the tree will be injured or killed from the oxygen depletion," Pyzner says. "Good water management, including regular irrigation and mulching, will maintain tree health, vigor and reduce fruit drop."

Pyzner also stresses that the factors which influence a fig tree's susceptibility to cold injury are related to how the tree is cared for during late summer and early fall.

"A mature tree which has lost all its leaves in early fall and becomes totally dormant before winter can withstand much lower temperatures than a tree rapidly growing at the time of the first frost," he explains. "So the grower should reduce irrigation in the fall to reduce growth and encourage the onset of dormancy."

The LSU AgCenter specialist says you shouldn't irrigate figs in October and November, since this could stimulate late-season growth, which is highly susceptible to frost and freeze injury.

"A fully dormant fig tree can withstand temperatures as low as 10 degrees Fahrenheit," he says, adding, "In North Louisiana, figs planted on the south side of a building will be less vulnerable to freeze damage."

For additional information on figs or other fruits you can grow in Louisiana, contact an extension agent in your parish LSU AgCenter office or visit the LSU AgCenter's Web site at <http://web.archive.org/web/20060206092611/http://www.lsuagcenter.com/>

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