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Helping a fig tree bear fruit

By Jennifer Weiss/The Star-Ledger

April 09, 2008, 5:38PM

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IN THE GARDEN



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JUST IN



RICH WEIDMAN

Q. Fig trees whether in pots or in getting the figs to bear fruit. My tree is 3 years old and I have pruned it every winter. Nothing happens, but it grows beautiful leaves. Would it be a good idea to put the tree in a container and place it in the garage for the winter? Help! -- *F.B.K. A.* **A.** Figs (*Ficus carica*) can be planted in the ground or containers. They normally require some protection from winter winds and cold temperatures, if left outdoors in our area. Figs require at least eight hours of sunlight during the growing season, so a southern exposure site is preferred. They grow best in a moisture retentive soil and a warm, dry climate, but it is important to select cultivars that are more tolerant of our conditions in the Northeast. Many times, if plants are killed to the ground, they will re-grow from root sprouts.

It is not uncommon for figs to fail to set fruit or ripen properly. Figs have a long juvenile period, or length of time in which a plant will not produce fruit -- possibly four years to five years. It is important to not overfertilize plants. A spring application of an organic fertilizer is sufficient for plants in the ground, but potted figs may require periodic feeding with a dilute, balanced fertilizer during the summer.

Extreme heat and dry weather can cause poor fruit production and reduce quality. Specific varieties of figs may not pollinate in this area (for example, California types). Heavy winter pruning and improper pruning that leaves branch stubs susceptible to disease also will reduce fruit production.

Many people grow figs in pots in this part of the country. Figs are well suited to containers, which restrict their root growth and, in turn, make them more fruitful. In containers, figs will experience less vegetative growth and have more energy for the production of fruit. They will need to be watered more often, though.

Repot and root prune the plants every two to three years. Containers should be shaded in the heat of summer to reduce root damage and water loss. Bring the containers inside in late fall and keep them in a cool location with moist soil. After spring frosts, the containers can be brought outside once again and placed in a southern exposure. Plants will begin to grow and the fruit will be borne in wood of the previous year's terminal shoots. Pick the fruits when fully ripe -- fruit will tend to hang down, be soft to the touch and have slight splits in the skin.

Figs recommended for our climate include 'Brown Turkey,' 'Celeste,' 'White Marseilles' and 'Conadria.' Of these, 'Celeste' is a little more tolerant of the cold. It is important to remember that the cultivar you select should be self-fruitful, not requiring cross-pollination.

Q. We have a substantial number of Sweet William plants bordering our beds. They come up every spring, and we couldn't be more delighted. We wonder if pruning them back -- taking all of the brownish-tan old growth -- is beneficial to the plants. I would also like to know if it is a good practice to trim off the old growth during the blooming season.
 -- *Ellen B.*



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A. Sweet William (*Dianthus barbatus*) is a wonderful border plant that blooms from late spring into the summer. Sweet Williams are biennials, which means they will produce vegetative, non-flowering growth the first year and flower the second. They can survive the winter in milder climates, especially in protected areas.

It's wise to remove dead or dying leaves, stems and flowers to improve the overall health and vigor of the plant. This practice also can help reduce the spread of disease and insect problems. Removing old flower heads may cause new plants to develop around the crown area, which can then be separated and planted. The seed that falls from seed heads may develop into plants for next year's flowers.

Sweet Williams must love the location in your yard. The plant prefers a sunny spot with protection from the mid-day sun in warmer regions, well-drained soil, and slightly acidic to neutral soil. It is important to maintain soil moisture, so you should lightly mulch around the plants.

Sweet Williams are fascinating plants that come in a wide range of colors. There are shades of lilac, pink, white and red; single or double flowering varieties; and varying heights from 6 inches to 2 feet. Sweet Williams make excellent cut flowers, by themselves or as part of a mixed flower arrangement.

Resources: Visit njaes.rutgers.edu or ifplantscouldtalk.rutgers.edu for gardening information and fact sheets.

Bill Hlubik's "Plant Talk" column appears every Thursday in The Star-Ledger. Bill is a professor and agricultural and resource management agent for Rutgers Cooperative Extension-The New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, Rutgers University. He is also a host of the "If Plants Could Talk" television series on NJN Public Television. Send your garden inquiries to Plant Talk, The Star-Ledger, 1 Star Ledger Plaza, Newark, N.J. 07102-1200 or e-mail them [here](#).

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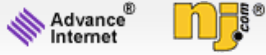
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