

## CUTTINGS; Figs: Like Having a Backyard Mediterranean

By Lee Reich  
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EACH year, about the middle of September, I take a trip to the South of France, and this year I'm planning one for July, too.

These are not real journeys, but imaginary ones, in which I am carried aloft by the taste of figs I pick from my own trees. The experience of biting into a store-bought fig, dried or fresh, pales beside that of savoring the truly ripe fruit, which doesn't travel well much farther than arm's length. No, I don't garden in California or the Deep South, but in the Hudson Valley, where winter temperatures regularly drop to 20 degrees below zero.

The fig, *Ficus carica*, is native to the sunny, hot summers and mild winters of the Mediterranean, but it is adaptable, and can be grown well beyond its native haunts. Although a fig tree can grow quite large in Mediterranean climates, it is easily coaxed into becoming a more easily protected bush or small tree. Even the roots do not mind being pruned or cramped.

The fig's unique fruiting habit also lends itself to northern growing. Some varieties, such as Flanders, King and Verte, bear what is known as a breba crop, ripening in summer on the older parts of the previous year's stems. Other varieties -- Brown Turkey, Celeste and Magnolia, for example -- bear mostly a "main crop," in late summer and on into fall, on currently growing shoots. And then there are Conadria, Petite Negri and Negronne, which bear both ways and yield two crops each season.

To grow figs in the North, you must protect the branches from cold and match the variety to the length of the growing season and the protection offered.

For instance, a short growing season or a desire for summer figs means growing a variety that yields a heavy breba crop, and making sure branches do not suffer any winter damage.

Main crop varieties can have their stems cut back as much as a half by the grower or by winter cold and will still ripen fruit if the season is sufficiently long. Except in the far North, the growing season is long enough for at least the beginnings of main crops to ripen, so depending on protection and variety, you can plan for summer and/or fall crops.

One way to protect fig stems in winter is to bury them. I remember a large tree that grew in Wisconsin and each year ripened hundreds of figs. It had a trunk about six inches in diameter and grew in a chest-high trench into which it was bent each fall. Old doors were laid on top of the trench, then leaves piled on high. Each spring, the tree was uncovered and the trunk hoisted up with pulleys. With ground temperatures a few feet deep over much of this country hovering year-round at about 50 degrees, it is easy to see how such a tree could survive Wisconsin winters.

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Fig branches are cold-hardy to about 15 degrees, so a shallow trench often suffices, or even just laying the stems on top of the ground before covering them. One trick to make it easier to bend a fig to the ground is to grow it like a shrub, keeping only young, supple stems. To do this, in late autumn, cut away any stems that are two years old (or older, if plants have never been pruned like this). Leave them full length for breba crops; shorten them by a third for main crops. Forcing a spade into the ground near the trunk to cut the roots on one side of the plant makes it easier to bend the whole top to the ground in the opposite direction. Once the plant is down, keep it there with cinder blocks or ropes pegged to the ground. Then cover it with leaves or straw, and a sheet of plastic or other waterproof material. Keeping the branches drier lessens the chance of rot.

A fig can be left upright and protected if it is a main crop variety or if winter temperatures dip no lower than about zero degrees. In late autumn, draw the stems together and tie them, then surround them with a cylinder of chicken wire or fencing. Pack this cage full of dry leaves or straw and cap it with a bucket or something else to shed water.

But there's another way. I protect my fig trees by growing them in large pots that I trundle down to my cool basement early each winter. Being subtropical rather than tropical plants, figs enjoy this brief winter rest, ideally between 25 and 45 degrees. An unheated foyer or garage might also provide the right temperature range. While resting, the tree is leafless, so it needs no light and only enough water to keep the soil from going bone dry.

My older fig -- 10 years old, five feet high and in a 10-gallon container -- is the variety Brown Turkey. Late each autumn, I tip it out of its pot and shave back the root ball by a couple of inches so that I can give it fresh potting soil. I also cut back the stems by about a third to make it easier to maneuver the plant through doorways to the basement, and to stimulate a modest amount of new growth for the next year's crop.

My younger fig, the variety Verte, gets similar treatment, except that I leave a few stems full length. These will bear pale green fruit, syrupy sweet and strawberry-colored within -- the fuel for my midsummer "voyage" to the Mediterranean.

Fig plants are available by mail from Edible Landscaping, P.O. Box 77, Afton, Va. 22920; (804) 361-9134, and from Raintree Nursery, 391 Butts Road, Morton, Wash. 98356; (360) 496-6400. Both offer free catalogues.

THIS WEEK

Help Gray Plants; Chase Leaf-Eaters

High rainfall and humidity have taken a toll on gray plants. Woody subshrubs like lavender and lavender cotton (*Santolina chamaecyparissus*) may need reshaping. Doing it now will give new growth time to harden off. Lamb's ear is especially susceptible to foliar diseases: remove individual dead or rotting leaves and cut out rotted sections.

Cut back yarrow and perennial salvia to lateral buds for repeat flowering. Shear spiderwort to the ground if disheveled and no longer blooming -- it will produce new foliage within a month. Stop pinching fall bloomers like chrysanthemum, aster and sedum.

Leaf skeletonizers like Japanese beetles and two-banded Japanese weevils are feeding. Hand-picking is safer for beneficial insects and birds than chemical controls. Sweep up large populations with a hand-held vacuum and dump in soapy water. PATRICIA JONAS

Photos: Brown Turkey figs ripening, left. Above, a Verte fig that has just come out from its winter rest. (Photographs by Lee Reich)



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