

Figs and Kiwi Fruit

Figs

Many Northwesterners think of the fig, *Ficus carica*, as a subtropical fruit suited only to warmer climates. Figs grow fine in our area and produce a sizable crop of fruit in most years. Fig trees can reach 30 feet in height but often stay much smaller.

To ensure success figs need to be grown in full sun, preferably on the south or west side of a building. A combination of sun and reflected heat is needed to produce fruit. Any tricks the gardener can use to provide extra heat will be rewarded with more and better-quality fruit. Occasionally, during a hard winter of temperatures near zero, some of the wood will be killed back. Figs are vigorous growers, however, so recovery is often complete within one season.

Fig fruits are produced where leaves attach to the branch. Under ideal conditions, fig trees produce two separate crops. The first crop is produced on the previous season's growth, and the second crop on the current season's growth. In our area, however, few second crop figs are produced, and those that are rarely get enough heat and time to mature.

Training a young fig tree involves correctly spacing the branches and forcing it to have only one main trunk. Figs can also be trained to an open center or vase shape, allowing good light penetration into the canopy. To train a newly planted tree to an open center, cut it off to 2 ½ to 3 feet in height, forcing lateral buds to produce many new low branches. The following winter select three or four of these for the main branches, cut them back to about 36", and remove all the rest. Annual pruning, done during the dormant season, is ordinarily limited to heading back the previous year's growth by about a quarter to stimulate new growth. Some thinning may become necessary if the canopy gets too dense. In areas where figs tend to freeze back badly they might be grown best as a large multi-stemmed shrub.

In our soils, fertilizing should not be necessary. In fact, it could cause too much soft vegetative growth, inhibit fruit production or increase winter injury. Figs grown here have no significant disease or insect problems, and spraying is unlikely to be required.

Only fully matured figs are good for eating fresh. Ripeness can be determined by the fruits bending at the necks and detaching easily from the tree. If the fruits are picked with stems attached they tend to remain in good condition longer, although figs seldom last more than a few days at most.

Commonly available varieties appropriate for trial in Puget Sound area gardens include:

- 'Brown Turkey' - Quite hardy, small tree. Fruit has bronze-colored flesh.
- 'King or 'Desert King' - Hardy tree. Produces white flecked greenish fruit with purplish pulp.
- 'Latterula' – White Italian Honey fig. Very hardy variety bearing yellow-green fruit with honey colored flesh.

Kiwi Fruit

Kiwis have become popular additions to our gardens. Since several kinds are now available, there is a great deal of confusion about the various types and their culture. The commercial or fuzzy kiwi, *Actinidia deliciosa*, has huge leaves and big, fuzzy skinned fruit. The hardy kiwi or *A. arguta* has smaller leaves and fruit about an inch long with smooth skin. Both species are hardy in most of Western Washington, although late spring or early fall frosts can damage either, since they grow over such a long season. When dormant, the fuzzy kiwi tolerates temperatures down to 10° F, while the hardy kiwi can go as low as -25° F.

Two other hardy species of *Actinidia* are often available. *A. polygama*, silver vine, has leaves on male plants that are partly or entirely white. The fruit may not be very edible. *A. kolomikta* is similar, but the male plant's leaves have pink and white variegation. Its fruit is good and it is the only species that will do fine in shade.

All of the *Actinidia* species are ornamental, deciduous vines. Their white, usually fragrant, flowers are either male (with anthers and pollen) or female (with ovaries that ripen into fruit). Both male and female plants are needed for fruit production. Even "self-fertile" cultivars usually bear heavier crops if males are present. The various species seem compatible, if bloom times overlap. 'Hayward' is the standard female *A. deliciosa* cultivar, but 'Blake' (self-fertile) and 'Saanichton 12' are also possibilities. Recommended female cultivars of *A. aguta* are 'Issai' (self-fertile) and 'Ananasnaja'.

Actinidias are all fast-growing, vigorous vines. *A. kolomikta* is not as rampant as the others, usually remaining at 15-20 feet unpruned. All are useful for covering walls, fences and arbors. For best fruit production, kiwis should be trained on strong trellises and pruned yearly. Trellises constructed of treated, 4 x 4 posts spaced 15 to 20 feet apart and set in concrete are ideal. Each six-foot-high post should have a five-foot crossbeam fastened to the top. String three #12 wires between the crossbeams, one in the middle and one on either end.

Plant the kiwi midway between posts and train it to grow as a single stem up to the middle wire. At this point, prune it off and encourage two branches to grow in opposite directions on the center trellis wire. These main arms will be permanent branches from which fruiting laterals will grow. Allow laterals to grow on opposite sides of these arms at about 10-inch intervals. Since fruit is borne only on new growth coming from one-year-old wood, it is necessary to renew the laterals every two to three years. Some experts do it annually. Normally only the first five or six buds on the current season's growth produce fruit.

For good fruit production, full sun is essential. A well-drained soil with adequate water through the summer is also necessary. Kiwis do not need much fertilizer.

Harvest fuzzy kiwi in late October to early November before hard frosts. Put them into storage near 32°F for a month or two. After this, the fruit will ripen at room temperature in about a week. Hardy kiwi and the other species will generally ripen on the vines in September or October.

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