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Growing figs

By Bunny Guinness

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Fruit dish: The sweetness of figs can grace many recipes

Bunny Guinness solves your gardening problems

My fig tree has fruits the size of large marbles now. Will these come to anything?

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The figs that ripen in this country are the Breba crop (the first), which usually ripens over a month or so. The second crop, the ones you see on your plant now, rarely ripen here.



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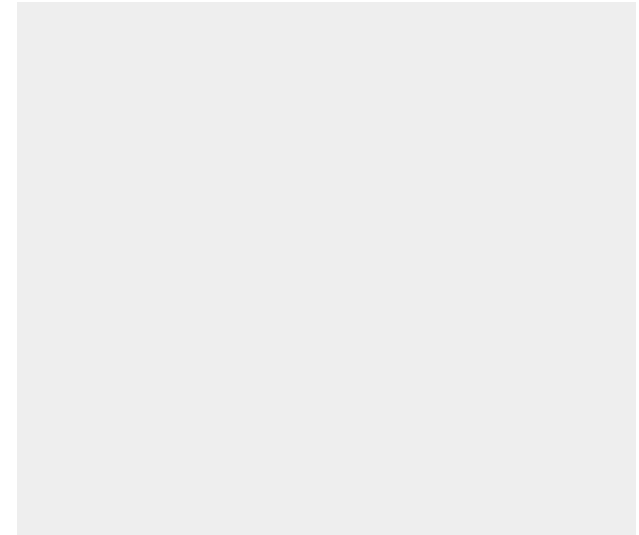
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On young bushes, it is advisable to remove anything larger than a pea at this time of year, because they tend to rot, damaging your chances of fruit next summer.

However, on a large shrub it is physically difficult to do this. As you will get a substantial crop anyway, it is not really necessary.

Stephen Read from Reads Nursery (01508 548 395, www.readsnursery.co.uk) says they planted out some larger trees this spring, and on these, some of this second crop are starting to ripen now, but it has been an exceptional year. It has occasionally been known for second-crop figs to form an early crop the following year, but not of great quality.

How and when should I prune?

Figs really are a lazy man's fruit and, once they have had their formative training, mature trees or wall-trained shrubs do not need much attention apart from some replacement pruning. This involves removing one of the seven or so main limbs every three to four years in March or April, to stop the whole bush becoming too old and unproductive. Apart from this, providing you have the wall space, you can leave well alone. I have seen many such "neglected" plants, and they still fruit well, although perhaps not as well as they might.

On the other hand, if you want to maximise your crop (assuming it is against a wall), buy a copy of Clive Simms' Nutshell Guide to Growing Figs (Orchard House, £3.50, tel 01780 755615) to see how to fan train it against a wall – it is not hard. Once you have established an approximate fan of branches, you can start the ongoing pruning regime.

Firstly, remove any weak branches in winter. Then, in April, remove the very tips of the main branches, above the developing figs. This will encourage side shoots, which are summer-pruned by cutting back in June to about four leaves. This technique can almost double the crop and bring it forward by a couple of weeks. Do not be tempted to cut back hard in winter, unless you don't mind forgoing a lot of your crop – this will cause lots of new growth but little fruit.

Watch out for the white sap; some people are highly allergic to it. Stephen Read's wife finds that high-factor suncream prevents a reaction. Do remove suckers from the base and pot them up now – a great Christmas present!

I love figs but have no south-facing wall. And how far north can you grow them?

I am going to plant some on north-facing walls (I already have them on south and west). But I will remove some of the leaves, allowing more light to the fruit. They might not be so sweet, but I will still expect decent crops.

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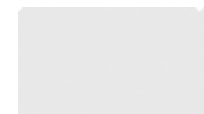
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Another option is to grow them as free-standing trees. Usually these are trained up on a leg (a short trunk); otherwise they will just sucker out and form a thicket 40ft wide. Plant them at five to six-metre (15-20ft) centres, or at three-metre centres if you are going to restrict the canopy size.

Figs do surprisingly well on many soils, even on heavy clay. Otherwise let the grass grow right up to the trunk (once they have established) to slow them down or, on rich soil, restrict their root run by planting them in some sort of restrictive container. Standard figs in containers look fantastic, but I would stand the container on soil, so that they can root through and stabilise.

Figs are far hardier than people think. They are productive in sheltered places as far north as Scotland. There were commercial fig orchards in England – Clopton Hall in Suffolk, for example – in the 1940s.

What are the best varieties?

Brown Turkey is the best known, as it is easy to propagate. Others, however, taste even better. Clive Simms' favourite is 'Desert King' from California. Stephen Read grows 118 varieties and his favourites are Brunswick (very hardy and very large), Castle Kennedy and, a heavy cropper for a small space, Petit Negri. I love them all.

Any good recipes?

Fig ice-cream is my favourite, closely followed by a salad of chunks of fig combined with Parma ham and a tart citrus dressing.

I feed and water my fig tree frequently but it still does not produce fruits, just masses of leaves.

There are two likely reasons for this. Received wisdom tells us to plant figs in poor soil, or in restricted conditions. Where figs are not fruiting, it is usually because they are making lush, leafy growth.

You should be aiming for an internodal distance (the length of stem between leaves) of 75-100mm (3-4ins). If it is longer, conditions are too favourable. I would stop feeding and watering (I have never fed or watered mine). If it still doesn't fruit, replant it if possible, but confine the planting area. Otherwise, propagate a new plant and plant it elsewhere. Take a cutting and put it in a polythene bag in the fridge for a week or two to hasten rooting, and then pot it into some free-draining compost. It can be done now.

The other cause could be over-hard pruning in spring. The fruitful growth is at the branch tips.

What sort of yield should I expect?

A mature Brunswick will produce about 6-8kg (12-18lbs) in a good year. A smaller, pot-grown variety perhaps only 1-2kg.



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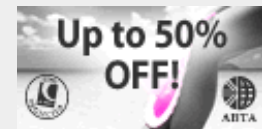
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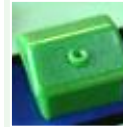


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