

Brian's Garden

Brian's Garden is devoted to the gardener and their endless pursuit of happiness with our green, leafy friends.

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Pruning a Fig Tree



How do you go about pruning a fig tree?

The proper method for pruning a fig tree (*Ficus carica*) will depend on the variety of fig grown. Many of the shrub forms are left to grow as they are, the only pruning

being the removal of deadwood.

Figs are grouped and pruned according to their flowering habits: 1- those that produce flowers on the season's new growth (White and Brown Fig varieties), and 2 - those that bear fruit on one year old or older wood (Black Fig varieties). In both cases, if the trees are grown strictly to produce figs (not for ornamental purposes), they are pruned (headed low) while they are young trees so that lateral branches will grow about 24 inches from the ground. In the first year, all but 3 or 4 of the best-placed branches are cut off the stem. These lateral branches should be approximately 6 - 12 inches apart, face opposite directions (spiral around the tree trunk) and form angles that are greater than 45 degrees. Right angled branches are very strong and less likely to break in wind storms. On Black Fig varieties, cut these laterals back by two thirds (2/3) to encourage stronger growth. Once a good structure has been formed on Black Fig varieties (group 2), the only pruning required is to thin out crowded branches and remove damaged, dead or poor branches. Poor branches include those that cross, rub or interfere with one another, branches that grow into the center of the crown or those that form sharp angles (less than 60 degrees) and are weakly attached to the stem. Overly long new stems may require pinching back (remove the top ½ inch) in summer to promote more branch development and prevent the tree from becoming leggy. Older trees generally do not require much pruning if they have been properly shaped when young. A properly pruned tree will have a well-balanced, evenly spaced, open crown (allows light into the top branches). Remove any suckers that arise at the base of the tree by pulling them off, not cutting them.

White and Brown Fig varieties produce fruit on the season's new

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growth, so as a rule they require severe pruning each year. Cut back the previous season's shoots that bore fruit to two eyes or bud scars in late winter or early spring (dormant season). New shoots will grow from these buds (if the tree is healthy) and produce a new crop of figs. In the dormant season the following year, these new shoots are again cut back to two buds. Pruning is thus carried on in this manner from season to season. In colder regions, this pruning results from winter die-back of the shoots. Suckers are removed at the base of the tree by pulling them from the source.

Figs may be trained and pruned to grow in the shape of a fan. First, wire is fastened horizontally against a building or fence at 12 inch intervals. The tree is then planted in well prepared soil below the wire and allowed to grow on. As the new shoots grow, loosely tie them to the wire in the shape of a fan, spacing the shoots so they are 12 to 15 inches apart. Tie all the shoots to the wire during the first summer so the tree can become well established. Once autumn arrives and the leaves fall off, remove any weak and crowded shoots.

Over the next two years in mid-summer continue to tie in well spaced new growth and cut out badly spaced shoots as well as those growing in the wrong direction. The idea is to grow a fan shaped tree with evenly spaced branches that do not overlap. All the branches and fruit must receive direct sunlight.

Pruning from this point on is to encourage new shoots that will produce fruit and to remove old, damaged and diseased shoots. In early spring of each year, cut out damaged and badly spaced shoots by cutting them back to a low (basal) bud on a main branch. Furthermore, select old branches that no longer bear fruit and cut about 1/3 to 1/2 of these stems back down to 2 buds at the base of these branches. The new shoots that emerge from these buds should be properly tied to the wire. These new shoots will produce the new crop of figs. Pinch out any side-shoots that develop over the summer as soon as they are noticed to prevent overcrowding and competition to the main fruiting shoots.

If fig trees are grown for ornamental or shade trees, they are shaped while young in the same way as those grown for fruit, except that the lateral branches are allowed to develop higher up on the stems. From this point on, in most cases, little pruning is required as fig trees form a good shaped tree on their own accord. Basic pruning is carried on over the years using the same practices as for Black Fig varieties mentioned above, removing dead branches, crowded branches, etc.

Figs grown as houseplants such as *Ficus benjamina* (Weeping Fig)

are pruned to control their size, improve the shape of the tree if it is unattractive, or to stimulate branching if the tree is sparsely branched and lacking foliage. The best time to prune the tree is just before it starts into active growth. This is obvious when numerous leafy shoots begin to appear. Active growth can appear at any time, not necessarily in early spring. The important thing to remember is to keep the natural shape or form of the tree in mind before any branches are removed. It's very easy to remove a limb, not so easy to put it back on. *Ficus benjamina* has a more or less Y shaped form, somewhat similar to the American Elm (*Ulmus americana*).

To shorten a tree that is outgrowing its living space, stop and look carefully at the framework or structure of the tree before pruning. When pruning has been completed, the tree should look the same as before you started pruning, only shorter. To shorten the tree, choose a lower branch on each of the main branches that is thinner and is growing on the outside of the main branch. Keep in mind that a tree should not have anymore than 25 percent of its top growth removed at one time. When a thinner branch has been chosen, cut off the main branch just above the side branch. Never leave a stub when removing a branch. The cut should be flush (parallel) with the branch that remains on the tree, not leaving a stub, nor cutting into the bark of that branch. A milky substance may ooze out of the wound, but it will soon coagulate. When all the main branches have been pruned as such, the tree should look the same, only shorter. All of the side branches will now become the main branches. The tree may have a few bear spots after this treatment, but they will soon fill in once new growth starts below the cut on the new main stems.

If a single branch is longer than most and ruins the shape of the tree, it can be removed by cutting it back to the bigger branch, or shortened by cutting directly above a bud or smaller twig. Cut just above the bud so that a stub is not left and do not cut too close to the bud. The bud or smaller twig should be facing in an outward direction from the tree, otherwise, this branch will grow into the center of the tree. The only time a cut is made above an inward facing bud is if

there is a hole in the trees canopy that needs filling. A new branch always grows in the direction that the bud is pointed.

Remove branches that cross or rub against other branches. Remove branches that tend to grow straight up into the trees crown. A few branches may need to be removed to open the tree up a little. Light should be allowed to enter the trees crown, otherwise, inside leaves will yellow and branches eventually die from lack of light. A more open canopy also helps prevent disease problems by permitting fresh air to circulate or flow through the branches. Always remove damaged or diseased branches as well.

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