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growing

Finessing The Fig

by Judith Adam

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With a little extra attention, Canadian growers can enjoy the dark, delicious delights of figs

I am famous for adopting unusual trees. Each spring I attend a local tree auction and carry home some young, woody plant to find a place in my garden borders. I've grown heartnut hedges that have soared more than three metres in a season, architectural ginkgoes (used as a trellis for climbing roses) and rooted Japanese maple cuttings now grown to specimen size. But none was more wildly optimistic on my part than the little common fig (*Ficus carica*) I successfully bid for two years ago.

It was clear from the start that my frosty Zone 6a garden would be an inhospitable winter climate for figs. Only gardeners in Zone 8 in southern British Columbia have the slightest chance of overwintering a fig tree without protection. In colder zones they won't survive below -10°C , so they need substantial winter protection. But they're worth the effort. Their semi-tropical foliage lends an exotic touch to less-than-tropical Canadian patios, and the fruit is such a sweet treat.

My Italian greengrocer supplies ripe figs from his own tree, each carefully wrapped in tissue paper and saved for me behind the counter. But the potential for my own crop of figs (relished with heavy cream for breakfast) elevated the anticipation to new levels of hope and pure joy. Such an overwrought emotional state is not unlike the sentiments of Alexis of Thuri, the fourth-century BC poet of comic Greek theatre, who claimed the fig as "that god-given inheritance of our mother country" and the "darling of my heart." Along with the olive, the fig is the world's oldest fruit, much appreciated by ancient Egyptians, Hebrews and Persians. The satiny green, purple and almost black fruits were valued for their succulent sweetness and mild laxative effects to "free the stomach."

Many Canadian gardeners of Mediterranean heritage cherish fig-growing traditions. Some dedicated few build fig houses out of plywood hoardings (complete with roofs) around their trees. These structures are quickly erected in late autumn, when the trees are bare of leaves, and are removed in early spring, just as buds begin to swell.

But the more common method of frost protection is to keep the tree small with yearly pruning, so the plant and its root ball can be carefully dug up in late autumn. It's then buried on its side in a shallow trench and stuffed all around with lots of straw or leaves. Several layers of old carpeting are then laid overtop and covered with plastic held down by bricks. It's not pretty, but it does the trick and, insulated with a thick blanket of snow, safely carries many fig trees through a Zone 5 or 6 winter. For colder zones, you must grow the tree in a container and store it in a shed, cold basement or garage, where the temperature stays between -6 and 9°C .

I decided not to take any chances planting out my fig and kept the 60-centimetre cutting in a container on my back porch, where I could appreciate it



FIGS TO GROW

All figs are adaptable to containers; the following cultivars are particularly recommended for short northern growing seasons:

'Bifara' Five-centimetre, purple fruit.

'Brown Turkey' Cold-tolerant, large purple-brown fruit, pink flesh.

'Celeste' ('Blue Celeste') Cold-tolerant, light purple skin, intensely sweet, good for drying, ripens early.

'Desert King' ('King') Green-yellow skin, pink flesh, sweet and rich.

'Italian Honey' ('Italian Golden Honey', 'Lattarula', 'Blanche') Medium to large, yellow-green skin; very sweet honey flavour.

'Kadota' Large, yellow-



green skin, amber flesh. 'Marseilles' Five-centimetre fruit, slightly ribbed skin, yellow-white when ripe.

'Natalina' Abundant small purple fruit, very sweet.

'Osborn Prolific' Bronze-brown skin, amber flesh, sweet and rich, very productive.

'Peter's Honey' Two crops per season, very productive; amber fruit.

'Violette De Bourdeaux' ('Negronne') Cold-tolerant, purple-black skin, light pink flesh. One large crop in early fall.

'White Fig' ('Golden Alma', 'Alma', 'Italian White') Cold-tolerant, upright form, good patio plant. Resistant to rust and fungus. Lemon-sized, gold-green fruit; amber-pink flesh.

every day. I overwintered it in my attached garage. Put a plastic bag over the plant and its container to help conserve moisture, and water occasionally throughout the winter.



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