

Planet Fig

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Hastening breba and main crop fruit maturation

A fig tree can be successfully grown in short-summer climatic zones provided certain conditions are met to hasten fruit maturity. Finding the right fig variety for a given locale can be difficult and somewhat impractical. Therefore it may be necessary for the gardener to provide methods that will help mature the fruit when nature cannot. Despite the beauty of its leaves and branches as an ornamental piece in the landscape, the fig tree is more often removed by the gardener out of frustration for lack of fruit production.

By using the following methods, it is possible to accelerate ripening times for both breba and main crops. However, the process involves direct contact between the gardener and the tree. For anyone who is either sensitive or highly allergic to any part of the fig tree, especially the milky sap, these methods should be avoided or, at best, performed by someone else.

Breba crop

People living in areas where summers are really short (3-4 weeks) and cool, where breba ripening is a real issue may employ two techniques simultaneously:

- Suppressing terminal buds

In the spring, once the fig tree breaks dormancy, it is necessary to select half the branches that would bear the breba fruits and remove all terminal buds. Care must be taken to avoid damaging any small fig buds in the process. This operation allows directing the flow of sap towards the fruits to increase fruit size and hasten ripening time.

- Suppressing breba fruits

It is recommended to remove all of the breba figs remaining on the branches carrying a terminal bud. This will allow these branches to grow and bear the future breba crop for the following year. In addition, if main crop figs develop on these same branches, they should also be removed.

If, in spite of all of these efforts you notice that a lot of energy is used to produce new branches, thus preventing breba growth, then you may have to completely remove half of the branches carrying brebas and suppress all terminal buds on those branches remaining. The following year, it is necessary to allow the fig tree to develop without any pruning or bud removal. This operation makes it possible to obtain a crop one year out of two and to control the plant growth.

Main Crop

In the open ground, the ripening of the main crop is difficult outside of the Mediterranean climate, because these figs require a long summer to be successful. When summers are too short, the fruit grows very little, lacks sweetness, or hangs on the tree without ripening throughout the winter months.

Our ancestor gardeners described several methods to accelerate maturation time of these fruits. However, these techniques have their limits because results may vary

according to the selected cultivar. Therefore, it is considered useless to select fig trees which ripen late in a Mediterranean climate zone, when one lives in Paris, Geneva, Berlin, or any other city in the northern part of the Alps.

These methods were described in various reference books, of which here a few selected extracts:

- Oiling

"When the figs reach more than two third of their final size, their maturity is accelerated by inserting 3 or 4 lines, in the eye, with a punch soaked in olive oil".

Source: "Le Bon Jardinier, Almanach pour l'année 1833", par A. Poiteau et Vilmorin.

"It consists in placing a drop of olive oil in the eye (ostiole) of the fig, with a cut feather, a straw or a small oil-can". "It is a delicate operation which must be performed in the morning or in the evening, when the sky is dark.

Source: "Figues, éditions Target" par Pierre Baud.

- Suppressing breba figs and growth control

"When one has many fig trees, a certain number must be chosen to carry main crop. Here's how to proceed: all breba figs must be removed, when they will be as big as finger tips. All wounds must be cauterized with lime or powder plaster, so that sap does not spill out. The branch will get more elongated and the main crop figs will appear earlier; when there will be 6 or 8 figs on a branch, the terminal bud will be pinched; the figs will take benefit from this, will grow faster and will have enough time to ripen before the frosts".

Source: "Le Bon Jardinier, Almanach pour l'année 1833", par A. Poiteau et Vilmorin.

In my opinion, the second method is the most interesting, but I think that it can only be successful with fig trees that are really biferous. A fig tree producing only a few breba figs and hundreds of main crop figs will not behave differently whether brebas are removed or not. In fact, the ideal candidates are these fig trees which produce a good quantity of breba figs, whose majority will eventually fall, while they already have a good size.

According to the situation or micro-climates existing in each garden, the number of new sprouts should be contained. A decision must be taken as to either keep little new sprouts or suppress them completely, as a lot of energy is drawn away from the branches carrying breba or main crop figs.

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