Friday’s Feature
By
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 Fantastic figs

Growing up in the South, one plant I remember seeing often at the old homesteads is the fig tree, often outlasting the house itself. And if you’re a fan of figs, you’ll be glad to know that fig trees are one of the easiest fruit trees to grow around your home. With little care, they will produce crops of juicy, sweet figs every year.

The common, or edible fig, is a native of Asia Minor and the Mediterranean region and is thought to be one of the first plants cultivated by humans.

Although commonly referred to as a fruit, the fig is actually the flower of the tree, known as an inflorescence (an arrangement of multiple flowers). Flowers are produced inside a concave structure that enlarges and becomes the fleshy fig.

It is because the flowers are inside the fruit that gardeners should only buy certain varieties of figs. Never purchase or attempt to grow the kinds of figs grown in California. They require pollination by a tiny wasp that cannot survive in Florida’s climate. So choose a Southern variety such as Celeste, Brown Turkey, Green Ischia, San Piero or Magnolia.

Fig trees are easy to grow. First, select the warmest spot in the landscape. The tree should be protected from North winds. Be sure to plan for growth when choosing a spot for a fig tree. Although not huge, fig trees will grow 15 feet or more high and wide. Also, plant them in a sunny location away from large trees with overhanging branches. Figs will not produce well unless they receive at least six hours of direct sun daily, and more is better.

Figs do not perform well under acid soil conditions, so mix lime with the soil prior to planting. For older trees, apply lime every three to four years.

There is little known about the specific fertilizer needs of figs. They do, however, respond well to very small amounts of a complete fertilizer applied once a month during the growing season.
Figs will not tolerate excessively wet soil but they do need a lot of water during the fruiting season. Fig trees may actually drop fruit if they are drought stressed. Once the crop is damaged, supplemental watering will not correct the problem. Pay close attention to watering, since this is one of the few things figs are picky about.

Fig trees have relatively shallow root systems, so a 4-inch layer of mulch, such as leaves or pine straw, spread over the soil under the canopy of the trees is highly recommended to keep the roots moist. Heavy organic mulches will also tend to lessen nematode damage which can be significant on fig trees.

Once the crop is made, the primary pest is birds. Harvest ripe figs in early morning to avoid their feeding. Bird netting can be purchased, and is helpful in keeping them out of the trees.

One fungal disease known as fig rust sometimes attacks leaves causing a rusty brown appearance, defoliation, premature ripening and decreased cold tolerance. Where rust is a problem, rake up all fallen leaves and remove them from your property. This reduces the amount of inoculum which might lead to infection the following season. The plant may also be pruned to increase air circulation inside the foliage. When watering, avoid getting leaves wet since this favors disease infection. There are currently no EPA-approved fungicides for use on edible figs in Florida.

So pull out your grandmother’s fig preserve recipe and think about planting a fig tree in your landscape.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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