

Fruit and Nut Review

FIGS

Figs, ancient plants pictured even in Egyptian hieroglyphics, grow in Mississippi and produce fruit in most parts of the state, except the northern one-third.

Figs grown in Mississippi are different from those that are grown in California and canned or dried. There are several types of figs, based on the kinds of flowers and their needs for pollination and fertilization.

The caprifig has male and female flowers within the same fig, and the fig wasp transfers pollen to figs with only female flowers that must be pollinated for the fruit to develop. This is not the type of so-called common fig grown in Mississippi. Common figs do not require pollination for the figs to develop, and they contain no seeds and have no grit.

Relatives of the fig (plant family *Moraceae*) include the mulberry; osage orange, which we know as bowdick and horse apple; all the ornamental figs, such as weeping fig (*Ficus benjamina*); the hops used in making beer; jakfruit (a large tropical, edible fruit); and the “black sheep” of the family, *Cannabis sativa*, commonly known as marijuana.

The fig is really a flower stem that is sort of turned inside out so the many little flowers are on the inside. The fleshy outside is stem tissue.

The cold-sensitive fig thrives in full sun, provided there is plenty of moisture and protection from the cold winter winds and the winter sun, which can cause bark splitting.

Figs grow well on a wide range of soil types if the soil is well-drained and reasonably fertile, and if plenty of moisture is available. Figs do best on a loamy soil that has plenty of organic matter. The fig plants have shallow root systems, so mulching (rather than cultivation) is rec-

ommended for weed control. Mulch also helps conserve soil moisture, which is critical to growth and production.

Varieties

Celeste is probably the most popular common fig variety for growing in Mississippi. The fruit is small, pear-shaped, light brown to violet-bronze with a pink pulp, and has a very sweet taste. This plant is vigorous, large, and productive, and it is the most cold-hardy of the common fig varieties. Celeste is resistant to souring and splitting and matures in July.

Another variety of fig in Mississippi is the **Southern Brown Turkey**, a medium-sized, light brown fruit that ripens over a 60-day period. Brown Turkey may be the more desired variety in areas where fig plants frequently freeze to the ground because this variety can produce a fair crop on young growth. It has a mild, sweet flavor. The eye is moderately closed, which helps reduce fruit spoilage on the tree. The plant is vigorous, large, and productive.

Planting

Plant your fig trees on the south side of buildings if you live in the colder areas of Mississippi. Plant fig trees while they are dormant; spring is the best time. Do not apply fertilizer at planting time or in areas where figs frequently freeze to the ground.

Dig your planting hole the same depth the fig trees were growing in the pot or the nursery row.

The failure of plants to produce figs and carry them through to edible maturity can be attributed to planting the wrong variety (such as one that requires pollination); fig rust, which defoliates the plants; nematodes, which reduce plant vigor;

freezing back, which results in nonproductive sucker growth; cold-damaged but not killed growth; and a lack of soil moisture.

Training and Pruning

Fig plants can be trained to either tree or bush form. (In Mississippi, fig plants frequently are frozen back to the ground by winter cold, making the tree form impractical.) Train to the bush form at planting by cutting off one-third of the young plant; this forces several shoots to grow from the base of the fig plant.

In late winter after the first growing season, select three to eight vigorous, widely spaced shoots to serve as leaders. Remove all other shoots. Be sure the leaders are spaced far enough apart to permit growth 3 to 4 inches in diameter without crowding. The leaders will then be strong enough to hold themselves and their fruit. If a leader is broken, cut it back; the next winter, select one or two of the suckers that grow.

The second year after planting, prune off one-third to one-half the length of the annual growth of each shoot. Wait until the danger of frost has passed, but before new growth has started, to prune. Prune out the dead wood each year and remove any branches that interfere with growth of the lateral branches. Remove all sucker growth that is not needed.

Fertilizing

Nitrogen usually is the only element lacking, but other elements may be deficient in some soils. When poor growth (fewer than 18 inches of new growth annually) indicates the need for fertilizer, follow these general rules:

- Use a fertilizer with a 1:1:1 analysis, such as 13:13:13. For fertilizing 1- to 2-year-old plants, apply one-fourth of a pound of fertilizer each month from beginning of growth through the end of August.
- Apply fertilizer to larger plants three times a year—late winter, early June, and late July.
- Use a total of 10 pounds of 13:13:13 each year for a fig bush 12 to 15 feet tall. For smaller fig plants, use about 1 pound of fertilizer annually, in three applications, for each foot of height. Overfertilization delays fruit production and makes fig plants more susceptible to winter injury.

Watering

Figs respond to a lack of soil moisture by shedding leaves, dropping immature fruit, and failing to ripen fruit. One inch of water (from rain or irrigation) per week during the growing season generally is adequate. A layer of organic mulch several inches deep under the fig bushes benefits the plants by saving soil moisture.