

GROWING COMMON FIGS IN THE LOW DESERT

Stacey R. Bealmear-Jones

Common figs (*Ficus carica*) are a delicious and simple fruit for home gardeners to grow. Figs need fewer chill hours than many other fruit trees. Chill hours are the number of hours winter temperatures are below 45 degrees Fahrenheit. This allows the plant to break its dormancy so that fruit can form. Figs do best in dry warm climates and need less than 300 chill hours, which make them a perfect fit for the low desert of Arizona.

Flowering and Fruiting

Fruiting occurs during the summer months so figs are best for year round residents of Arizona. Figs have two harvest periods, one in early summer (late June) and a second in late summer or early fall (August or September). Common figs have perfect flowers and self-pollinate. The flowers occur inside the developing fruit so they are never seen.

Site Selection

Fig trees can get very large, 10 to 30ft tall and can be wider than they are tall. Their size requires a site that gives the tree plenty of room to grow. Figs are deciduous, so they should be kept away from areas where you don't want leaves, such as pools and patios. Figs require full sun for at least 8-10 hours a day. They can grow in many types of soils, but do require soils that are well drained.

Planting

Figs, like most trees grown in the low deserts, should be planted in the fall or early spring to give the roots time to become established before the arrival of harsh summer heat. There are two fig varieties that perform best in the low desert. These are the Brown Turkey fig and the Black Mission fig. If you enjoy fresh figs and do not plan to can or dry them, Brown Turkey figs are best. These medium-brown fruit have a slight purple exterior and a pink interior. Gardeners who plan to preserve their harvested figs should plant a Black Mission fig because the fruit preserve better than Brown Turkey. The Black Mission variety is larger in size, the exterior is darker in color than Brown Turkey and they are also pink inside.



Immature Brown Turkey Fig.



Brown Turkey Fig

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Black Mission Figs



Brown Turkey Fig



Green Fig Beetle

Irrigation

Sufficient irrigation will increase fruit size and production so it's vital that figs get adequate water during the summer. This usually translates to watering every 3-5 days under normal summer heat, and more often when extreme heat conditions prevail. During the winter, trees may need to be watered every 2 weeks. Use a soil probe to help you determine when the tree needs water. Water all trees to a depth of 3 feet at each irrigation event. The amount of water it will take to get to 3 feet depend on your soil type and it's water-holding capacity. Fig trees will benefit by growing in a basin, this is an indented area with a berm around it to keep water in. The basin should be as least as wide as the trees outer leaves (drip line). This ensures that the roots are getting plenty of water where the roots are actively growing and not just at the trunk. For more information about the soils in your area contact your local cooperative extension office or soil conservation service. For more information about irrigation amounts, see the resource section for a link to a helpful irrigation publication.

Fertilization

Figs planted in the ground don't often need fertilization, except when growing in sand, or if the branches grew less than a foot since last year. To tell if fertilization is required, have your soil tested at a soil testing facility. If nutrients are low, use a 1/2-pound of nitrogen (ammonium sulfate or similar) and divide this amount into three applications during the growing season (May, June and July). For more information about soil testing labs in your area, contact your local cooperative extension office.

Pruning

Figs do not require special pruning to produce fruit, which is one of the beauties of this type of tree. The fruit is borne twice during the growing season: the first crop on last year's growth and a second crop on current season's growth. Avoid heavy pruning during the winter so you won't be removing the first season's figs. In warm regions of the state pruning is best done in the fall after the second crop has been harvested. In areas with cold winter temperatures, wait until the coldest part of the winter has passed to protect the tree from cold damage.

Pests

Another benefit to growing figs is their relatively pest free nature. The only insect pest of concern is the green fig beetle (*Cotinis mutabilis*), which eats the ripening fruit. Birds can also be pests of ripening fruit, while gophers are pests of fig tree roots. Beetles and birds can be kept away from fruit by covering the tree with netting or by bagging the fruit before it ripens. Not much can be done to keep gophers away.

There are two diseases in Arizona that can kill figs. These are Crown Gall (*Agrobacterium tumefaciens*) and Cotton or Texas Root Rot (*Phymatotrichopsis*). Figs should never be planted in soils known to have these diseases. There is nothing that can be done once a tree contracts a disease so prevention is the best method.

Other issues

Figs may take 3-4 years before they produce a viable crop so don't worry if your new tree does not bear any fruit for a few years. Long periods of dry hot weather can reduce fruit quality. To avoid this, make sure you are supplying plenty of water and consider applying mulch around the base of the tree to reduce evaporation of soil moisture.

Resources

Fig
by California Rare Fruit Growers
<http://www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/fig.html>

Fig
by Bob Polomski
http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/vegetables/tree_fruits_nuts/hgic1353.html

Fruiting Fig Well Suited to Desert Landscapes
by Laura Murphy
http://cals.arizona.edu/mohave/master_gardeners/kingman/articles/figs.pdf

Methods of Measuring for Irrigation Scheduling— WHEN
by Edward Martin
<http://extension.arizona.edu/sites/extension.arizona.edu/files/pubs/az1220.pdf>



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This information has been reviewed by University faculty.
extension.arizona.edu/pubs/az1636-2014.pdf

Other titles from Arizona Cooperative Extension can be found at:
extension.arizona.edu/pubs

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