Figs

The fig genus, *Ficus*, has about 850 species consisting of trees, shrubs, vines, and epiphytes. Most are native to the tropics but some extend their range into temperate climates. Many *Ficus* species are grown as indoor foliage plants and planted in landscapes across the lower elevations of Arizona. The single genus, *Ficus carica*, produces the edible figs we eat and enjoy. Some historical references indicate that figs have been cultivated and bred in the Middle East for over 11,000 years. This predates the known cultivation of grain in that area by several hundred years.

Figs are generally easy to grow in central Arizona. The fig is a unique fruit that is an inverted flower with most species having both the male and female flower parts enclosed in stem tissue. This structure is known botanically as a “syconium”. At maturity the interior of the fig contains only the remains of these flower structures, including the small gritty structures commonly called seeds. Actually, these so-called seeds usually are nothing more than unfertilized ovaries that failed to develop and impart the resin-like flavor associated with figs.

Many species of figs are pollinated by small wasps that must be present to set a fruit crop. This includes some of the cultivars grown commercially in California. The cultivars recommended for home use have only female flowers and set fruit without cross-pollination (parthenogenetic). Make sure you select one of these for backyard fig production (varieties are listed below).

Figs should be planted in the early spring to give the roots time to become established before the arrival of summer heat. ‘Brown Turkey’ and ‘Black Mission’ are common fig cultivars that perform well in Arizona. Both are dark-skinned figs with the ‘Brown Turkey’ being preferred for fresh eating and the ‘Black Mission” being best for preserving and cooking. “Celeste’ and “Chicago Hardy Fig” are additional cultivars that are widely used in home gardens and show some additional cold tolerance.

Summer irrigation will increase fruit size and production. This usually translates to watering every 3 to 5 days under normal summer heat, and more often during extreme heat. During the winter, trees may need to be watered every 2 weeks during periods of drought. 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 tree’s outer drip line.

Figs planted in native soil don’t often need fertilization. The exceptions are in sandy soils or if the previous season’s growth was under one foot. Under these conditions, apply small amounts of nitrogen fertilizer (1/2 cup of 10-10-10) three times during the growing season.

Figs do not require special pruning to produce fruit. 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 crop of figs. This may be difficult above 3,500 feet elevation. If freeze damage occurs regularly, wait until the coldest part of the winter is past and prune out freeze-damaged wood.

Cuttings can easily be rooted by home gardeners and planted in the landscape or orchard. Take stem cuttings in February from an older plant. The cutting should be 8 to 10 inches long. The cutting should be treated with a rooting compound and planted in sterile growing media (a fresh bag of potting soil) in a number one nursery pot. You can place a grocery store plastic produce bag loosely over the planted pot to conserve moisture. Plant the young tree when roots have formed and after the monsoon season has arrived when things have cooled off.

The primary insect pest is the green fig beetle (*Cotinis mutabilis*) which eats the ripening fruit. Small fig trees can be netted if birds become a nuisance. Two diseases may be damaging to fig trees: crown gall (*Agrobacterium tumefaciens*) and cotton root rot (*Phymatotrichopsis omnivora*). Both of these diseases are present in the Verde Valley and regularly vex home orchardists and commercial viticulturists. Fig trees may take three to four years of establishment before fruit is produced. Young trees do best when irrigated regularly during establishment.

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