Ison's Nursery & Vineyard

Fig Tree Planting Instructions

Growing Figs

Soil Preparation and Planting

Soil preparation should always include a preplant soil test. If your soil pH is low, adjust the pH to 5.5 to 6.5 with dolomitic limestone. Spread the limestone evenly over the entire area where the figs will be planted, then till the soil. If possible, till at least a 6-foot by 6-foot area where each bush will be planted at least 8 inches deep.
Figs grown in the bush form may be set as close as 10 feet apart in the row and 15 feet apart between rows. Figs grown in tree form should be set 15 to 20 feet apart in the row and 20 feet apart between rows. Plant fig trees while they are dormant. In warm areas, bare-rooted trees can be set out in fall or winter.

Before planting a bare-root tree, prune about one-third of its top, unless it was topped by the nursery, spread their roots, and set them in the planting hole.

Set trees in the planting hole 4 inches deeper than they were in the nursery to encourage low branching for bush form. Fill the hole with soil; water heavily enough to settle the soil around the roots. Do not apply fertilizer in the hole at planting.

Training and Pruning

Bush form is generally recommended for most areas. In the bush form, more of the fruit will be closer to ground level and easier to pick.

Begin training to bush form at the time of planting by cutting off one-third of the young plant. This forces shoots to grow from the base of the plant. Let these shoots grow through the first season. Then, late during the 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 you select are far enough apart to grow to 3 to 4 inches in diameter without crowding each other. If they are too close together, the leaders cannot grow thick enough to support themselves and their crop, and they tend to fall over or split off under stress of high winds. If this happens, remove the damaged leader and select a new one late the next winter by choosing one of the many suckers that arise annually.

If more branching is desired, head back the bush each spring beginning the second year after planting, after danger of frost is past but before growth has started. Do this by removing about one-third to one-half the length of the last year's growth.
Also, prune all dead wood and remove branches that interfere with the leaders' growth. Cut off low-growing lateral branches and all sucker growth that is not needed to replace broken leaders.

Fertilization and Watering

Fertilizing: Fig trees grow satisfactorily in moderately fertile soils with limited fertilizer. But fertilizer is needed in soils of low fertility or where competition from other plants is heavy.
Although nitrogen is usually the only needed plant nutrient, other nutrients may be lacking in some areas. If your soil is not very fertile, follow these general guidelines:

- Use a fertilizer with an analysis of 8-8-8 or 10-10-10.
- Apply fertilizer three times a year to bushes you are trying to bring into full production: early spring, mid-May, and mid-July. Mature bushes can be fertilized just once a year in the early spring.
- Fertilize newly set bushes with about 1½ ounce of fertilizer at each application. Spread the fertilizer evenly over a circle 18" in diameter with the bush in the center. On second-year bushes, increase the amount of fertilizer to 3 ounces at each application and the diameter of the circle to 24".
- On bushes 3 to 5 years old you are trying to bring into full production, apply 1/3 pound per foot of bush height per application. If the fruit are not reaching maturity and ripening properly, excess fertilizer or drought may be the problem; fertilization should be reduced.
- Mature bushes 6 years and older should be fertilized once a year in early spring. On bushes spaced 10 feet apart, apply ½ pound of fertilizer per foot of height, up to 5 pounds per year. On bushes spaced 20 feet apart, apply 1 pound of fertilizer per foot height, up to 10 pounds per year. Scatter the fertilizer evenly under and around the bush. A satisfactory amount of shoot growth for mature plants is about 1 foot per year.

Watering: For highest yields, figs need watering throughout the summer. The frequency and the amount of water depends to a large extent on the soil. As a rule of thumb, 1 to 1½ inches of water per week from rain or irrigation is adequate. Yellowing and dropping of leaves may indicate drought.

In lawns, the grass beneath fig plants may wilt in the heat while the rest of the lawn does not. This indicates the figs need water. Figs grown with lawn grasses may require one or more waterings a week during hot, dry periods.

Mulching: Figs respond well to mulching with organic materials. Mulch may reduce the effects of nematode problems.

If you are attempting to grow figs near the mountains, limited fertilizer should be applied to make the plants as cold hardy as possible.

Courtesy: The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension