

Figs are tasty additions to your yard



Chris Rusch
Ask a Master Gardener

Question: A couple came into the plant clinic this month and asked if figs grew in the area and if we had any tips for growing them.

Answer: Figs are easy to grow and are among the oldest fruits known to humankind. Native to western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean region, figs (*Ficus carica*) are members of the Moraceae family and are grown for their delicious edible fruit. The tree was brought to North America by Spanish missionaries in the early 16th century.

Of the four main types of figs, three – Caprifigs, Smyrna, and San Pedro – are not usually grown by home gardeners, because they have complex pollination requirements.

The fourth type, the common fig, is parthenocarpic – meaning the fruit forms without fertilization.

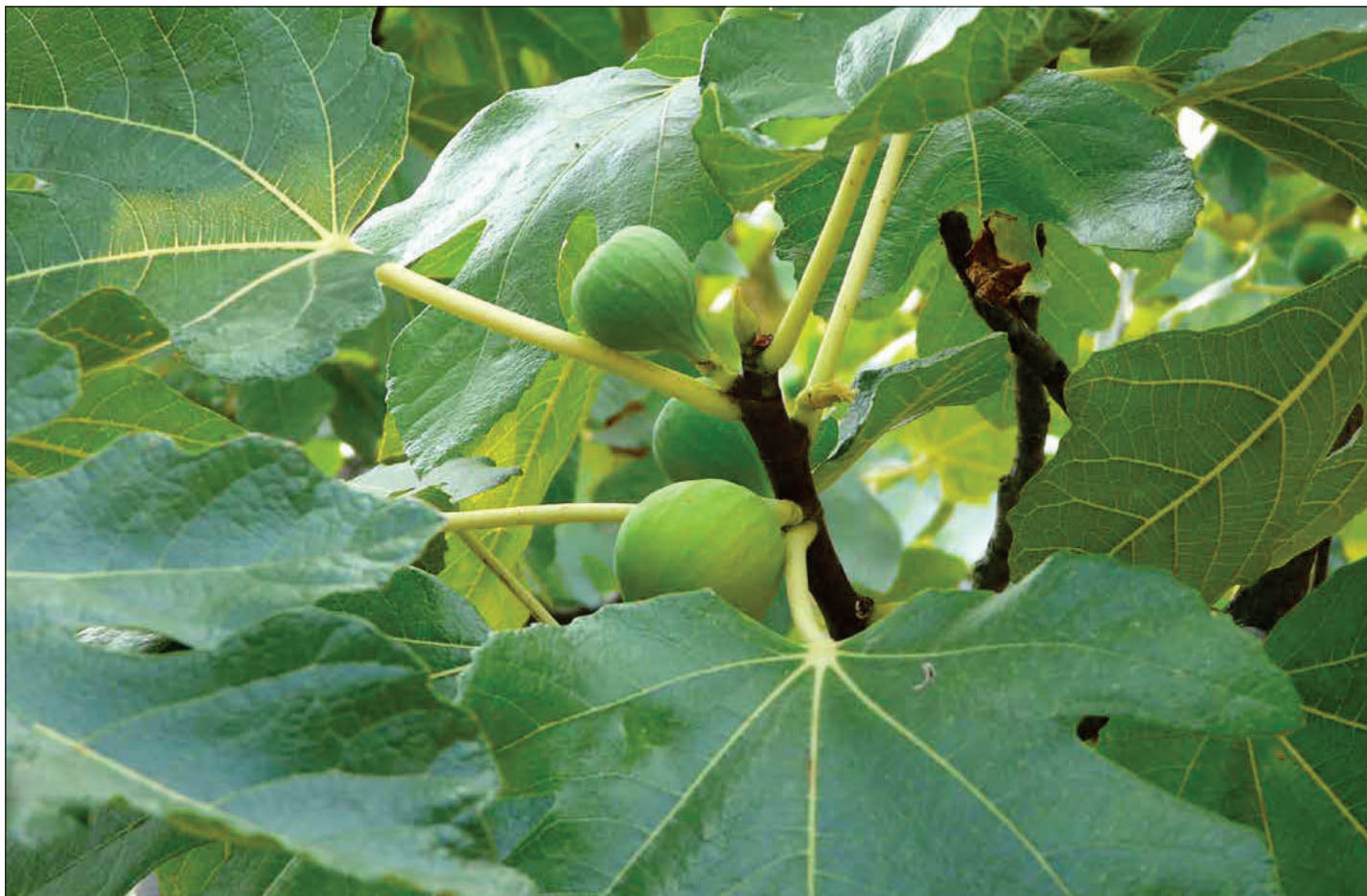
Let's look at a few varieties of this type. These three figs are recommended for our area: 'White Kadota,' 'Desert King' and 'Lattarula'. All have yellowish-green skin and amber flesh. They are sufficiently cold-hardy, ripen nicely and may produce two harvests.

When it comes time to plant – fall is optimal – choose a south-facing aspect where the sun shines all or most of the day. Planting is no different than other trees. Dig a hole twice as wide as the root ball and the same depth or no more than 2 inches deeper as it is in the pot.

The soil should be loose enough to drain well. Adding organic material will help with that. Make sure the pH is neutral – shoot for 6.5 to 7. Adding lime to the soil will bring western Oregon's typically acidic-leaning soil up to the correct level. Figs respond well to nitrogen fertilization. After the first season, apply fertilizer in the early spring so it can work its way down to the roots.

Be careful not to encourage excessive vegetative growth by nitrogen over-fertilization because this delays ripening and reduces fruit quality. Rather than using commercial fertilizer, top-dress the soil around the tree with compost once a year. Don't expect fruit for the first few seasons.

Since figs are subtropical in origin, they can tolerate drier soils. Newly planted trees need to be watered to establish the root systems. Irrigate figs occasionally during our dry periods to obtain good crops. Mulch your trees to retain moisture and control weeds.



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'White Kadota,' 'Desert King' and 'Lattarula' are fig trees recommended for our area.

Though not as complicated to prune as other fruit trees, it takes some practice to learn the art of pruning fig trees. Most suggest growing your fig as a multi-trunked plant. With two or three trunks, you can keep the tree lower and have the fruit easier to reach. There's a lot of fruiting wood if you have multiple trunks.

At the time of planting, prune the tree to a height of 2 to 3 feet above the ground. During the first growing season, the new shoot growth that arises near the point of topping forms the structural or main branches. During the first dormant season, select three or four main branches that are evenly distributed. Prune in January or February by opening up the interior of the tree and reducing its height.

To open up the interior, concentrate on taking out old wood, including a few large limbs. Leave about a third to a half of the one-year growth because that is what produces fruit. It's easy to tell the difference: the one-year growth is green and smooth while mature wood is gray. Also, the 1-year wood will have developing fruit on the tips of new growth that look like tiny nubbins.

Continue to train your tree during the first five years while the tree is increasing in height and spread. The main objective of pruning is to maintain tree growth in an upward and outward pattern by thinning out interfering branches and removing flat, low-growing limbs.

In colder winters the first crop of fruit may freeze. Check fruit when the tree



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leaves-out in spring. If the fruit is black, it's dead. As soon as you can, prune out the dead branch tips to generate new growth. The earlier you do this the better chance you have of getting the second crop of figs to ripen.

Figs should be allowed to remain on the trees until they ripen sufficiently to drop from their own weight. Harvested figs have a fairly short shelf life. Store them in the refrigerator for two or three days, tops.

To dry these fruits, wash them thoroughly and then dry them with a towel. Place them whole or halved on a wire rack, then place the wire rack on a baking sheet. Put the baking sheet in a 140-degree oven for eight to 24 hours.

You can also use a dehydrator, following the same instructions.

You'll know the figs are dry when the outsides become leathery and you don't see any juice on the inside. They should still be slightly pliable. Store the dried fruit in the refrigerator or freezer in airtight containers for 18 to 24 months.

If you're looking to expand your homegrown fruit repertoire even more, a fig tree is a terrific addition.

Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.