

Growing Figs on Long Island

There is nothing so delicious as ripe, fresh-picked figs from your own garden. Growing figs here on Long Island does take extra effort, but the rewards are worth it.

Figs are a warm-temperature fruit that are easy to grow in warmer areas; many varieties of figs are hardy to 15 degrees. On Long Island, however, the temperature may dip down to between zero and 10 degrees. It's possible to grow figs here, but special winter protection is necessary.

Location and Temperature

Figs require warm day and night temperatures for good fruit development and ripening. A protected, warm southern exposure free from late spring frosts makes a good location.

Soil

Well-drained soil enriched with Bone Meal and organic matter such as compost or peat moss is ideal. Figs do best in a soil pH between 6.2 and 7.2. Test your soil pH and add lime if pH is below 6.2. (See the box below for soil testing information).

Fig Filling for Cookies & Coffee Cake

Place 2 lbs. fresh figs and sugar to taste (start with ¼ cup) in a saucepan. Cook on low heat, stirring occasionally, until thick. Freeze in containers. Makes approximately 1 ½ cups filling.

Planting

Figs are usually available for sale in the spring, which is also when they can be planted. To plant a container-grown fig, gently remove it from the pot and slightly tease the roots apart around the outside of the root ball mass to encourage them to branch out into the surrounding soil.

Watering and Fertilizing

Figs grow best when a constant moisture supply is available. Mulching with an organic material like shredded cedar bark, pine bark or wood chip is a great way to keep the roots cool and moist and to prevent weed growth.

Fertilize figs with 5-10-5 or 5-10-10 fertilizer or any well-balanced organic fertilizer. Read and follow the label directions.

Harvesting

Pick fig fruits when they are soft and fall easily into your hand. If they exude white sap they are not ripe enough for picking. A mature tree will yield about 25 to 35 pounds of fruit per year. Overall, figs are a relatively carefree plant with the reward of sweet fruit that can be dried or canned, made into jam, pastries etc.

Pruning

It is best to cut your fig tree back heavily the first several years after you plant it. This will produce a bush form (multi-branched) rather than a tree form, which makes harvesting, maintenance and wrapping easier later on.

Cut young plants back to about half their height. This will force new shoots to grow from the base of the plant. Let these shoots grow through the first season.

During the next winter select three to eight vigorous, widely spaced shoots to serve as leaders. Be sure the leaders you select are far enough apart so they can get fairly large (3"- 4" diameter) without crowding each other. Remove all other shoots and prune the leaders.

Starting the second year after planting, you can prune fig plants each spring after the danger of frost has passed but before new growth starts.

Fruit is produced on the current season's new growth, so keep this in mind when pruning new growth.

Remove all dead wood, broken branches and branches that cross or rub against each other. Cut out all suckers (fast, vigorously- growing shoots) not needed for the replacement of broken or damaged leaders.

Make all cuts back to a bud or branch that faces the outside of the tree or shrub. Never leave bare stubs when pruning – these are entry points for decay. Use sharp pruning tools.

Winter Protection

Beginning around Thanksgiving, when all leaves and fruit is off, start by tying up the branches. Just before tying, some selective pruning can be done (see above).

Pull all side branches inward and upward so they form a vertical pattern. Tie them tightly in this position being careful not to break branches. Use strong, but soft, rope made of natural fibers.

Let the plant stay tied this way for a few weeks. Then, around the first week of December, begin wrapping. Choose a clear, dry day when it has not rained for a few days to be sure the rope used for tying is completely dry. Once wrapping is started, it must be finished the same day.

First wrap the tree with burlap from top to bottom. Make sure the burlap covers the tree completely. To hold the burlap in place, pin or fasten it to itself, not to the tree. Use large pins or nails the way a tailor would use pins to fasten fabric. Then, wrap the tree with heavy brown paper and tie it in place.

Next, surround the bottom-half of the tree with cardboard. You can use any large cardboard boxes; cut them to fit completely around tree and tie them in place.

Tar paper is next. Place it all around the tree in shingle-fashion such that water runs down the tar paper rather than getting inside. It is very important that water does not seep into any cracks or soak the inside materials. Tie the tar paper securely in place.

After wrapping is done, mound soil up around the base to further insulate and protect your fig tree from cold air. Some people put a pail on the top to prevent rainwater from getting inside. Whatever you do, never use plastic for wrapping any part of the tree! Water condenses and

freezes under plastic wrappings, damaging the branches.

In the spring, on a cloudy day after danger from frost is past (around mid-March), the wrapping should be removed. The earlier the covering can be removed, the greater the possibility that the fruit will have enough time to develop and ripen properly. However, if the wrapping is removed too soon there is danger that the figs will be killed by a spring frost.

It would be wise to be prepared for any late spring frosts by having a light cover or cloth available that is large enough to cover and temporarily protect the tree.

SHOPPING LIST

To plant and grow figs:

Lime – If soil pH is below 6.2
Compost or Peat Moss
Mulch
Fertilizer – 5-10-5 or 5-10-10

For providing winter protection for figs:

Strong but soft natural fiber rope
Burlap
Nails or pins for securing burlap
Cardboard
Tar Paper
Plastic Pail (optional)

pH Testing

pH levels are used to determine your need for lime in your soil.

pH test meters and kits are available for sale for at-home, on-the-spot testing.

Or, bring 1 cup of DRIED soil to our Garden Information Booth any time for a free pH test. The results are available while you wait.

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