

FIGS *FICUS CARICA*

Figs ideally need a warm climate, with long, hot summers, to bear heavy crops. In warm countries, figs are grown as informal bush or half-standard trees, with trunks of about 60–120cm (2–4ft). In cool climates, unless they have a very favoured site and are pruned to be very open in habit (to let in light), trees or bushes seldom crop well. Growing under glass is difficult unless the root run is severely restricted. By far the most usual outdoor tree form for cool climates is the fan; even this may not crop well every year, and winter protection, in the form of netting filled with straw or bracken, is advisable.

ROOT RESTRICTION

Fig cultivars are raised from cuttings, not grafted, but a dwarfing effect can be

achieved by restricting the root system, either by growing in pots or, in open ground, planting in a brick- or concrete-lined pit, 60cm (2ft) square, with a layer of broken bricks at the bottom, not a solid base.

FRUITING HABIT

The fig has an unusual fruiting sequence. Figs at three distinct stages of development may be present simultaneously. First to ripen are figs that overwintered in leaf axils as "embryo" fruits from the previous season. Following these are fruits that form in the spring on new growth and, in hot climates, develop to ripeness as the main crop late in summer. Meanwhile, embryo fruits for the next year's crop are forming near the tip of the new shoots.

In hot climates, this cycle results in a long cropping season. In cool climates, the summer season is not long or hot enough for fruits to develop and ripen in a single year. The only fruits to ripen and become edible will be those that overwintered as embryos from the previous year. Pruning is therefore concentrated on encouraging embryo figs to form, and giving these the best ripening conditions in their second year.

TIME OF PRUNING

Figs are pruned yearly in early spring, once any danger of prolonged frost has passed. In cool climates, summer pruning is also necessary: all new shoot



Fruit development, figs

On this unpruned shoot, a fig at the base that overwintered from last year is now ripening. Above it, figs that formed this spring will be the next to ripen, providing the summer is long and hot enough. Embryo fruits for next year are starting to form at the shoot tip.

tips are pinched back to five or six leaves. This lets in more light, and also helps to reduce the production of the second crop of unwanted figs. With its growth checked by tip-pruning, the shoot will not produce so many fruits but will start into growth again, producing sideshoots from its leaf axils. At the end of the growing season, the fruits in the leaf axils of these sideshoots will still only be at an embryonic stage, and may overwinter successfully. Any larger, but still green fruits on the main shoot will not survive. Pick them off to direct the tree's energy into the more worthwhile fruits.



Summer pruning

Pinch out the tips of young shoots when they have made five or six leaves.

FIG BUSH

Start with a two-year-old fig with three or four well-spaced laterals of equal vigour arising from the main stem, at a height of 45–90cm (1½–3ft) from the ground. Planting and pruning in late winter/early spring (in cool climates, once severe weather is over), form a basic bush framework as for an apple bush (see p. 108), with 8–10 main branches arising at or near the trunk.

Prune established fig bushes in spring and, in cool climates, in summer. In cool climates, spring pruning cuts should be made (see right) with the aim of keeping the bush as spreading and open in habit as possible. In warm climates, the reverse is true: cut spreading branches to upright shoots, and leave growth in the centre to give protection from sun scorch. In cool climates, pinch-prune new shoots in summer (see Summer pruning, above).



Established fig bush, spring (cool climate)



1 Cut back any frost-damaged shoots to healthy wood.

2 Thin out badly placed shoots and, to let in sunshine, overcrowded growth, particularly in the centre of the bush.

All pruning cuts have been made to encourage an open, spreading habit. In warm climates, denser growth is preferable.



3 Cut any leggy, bare shoots or old branches back to one bud, or 5–8cm (2–3in), to encourage new growth.

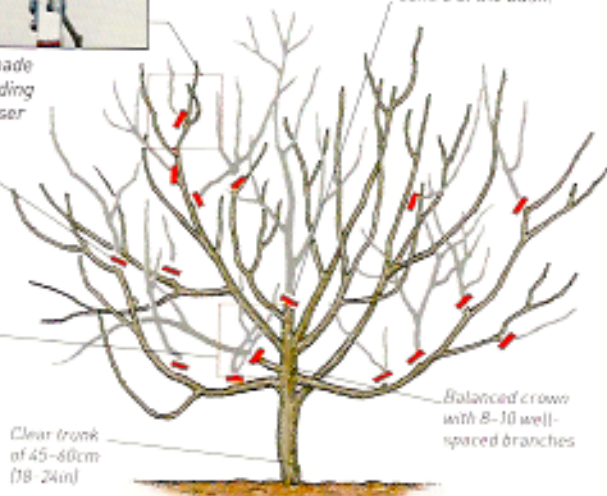


FIG FAN



A fig fan has the same branch structure as other fruit fans, but its main ribs must be further apart to allow for the fig's much larger leaves. A wall at least 2.2m (7ft) high and 4m (12ft) wide is required, with strong horizontal wires.

FORMATIVE TRAINING

Start with a robust, two- or three-year-old fig. If its laterals are weak, badly placed or otherwise unpromising, by far the best course is to start again: remove them all and prune the leader to 40cm (16in), to stimulate strong lateral growth the following year.

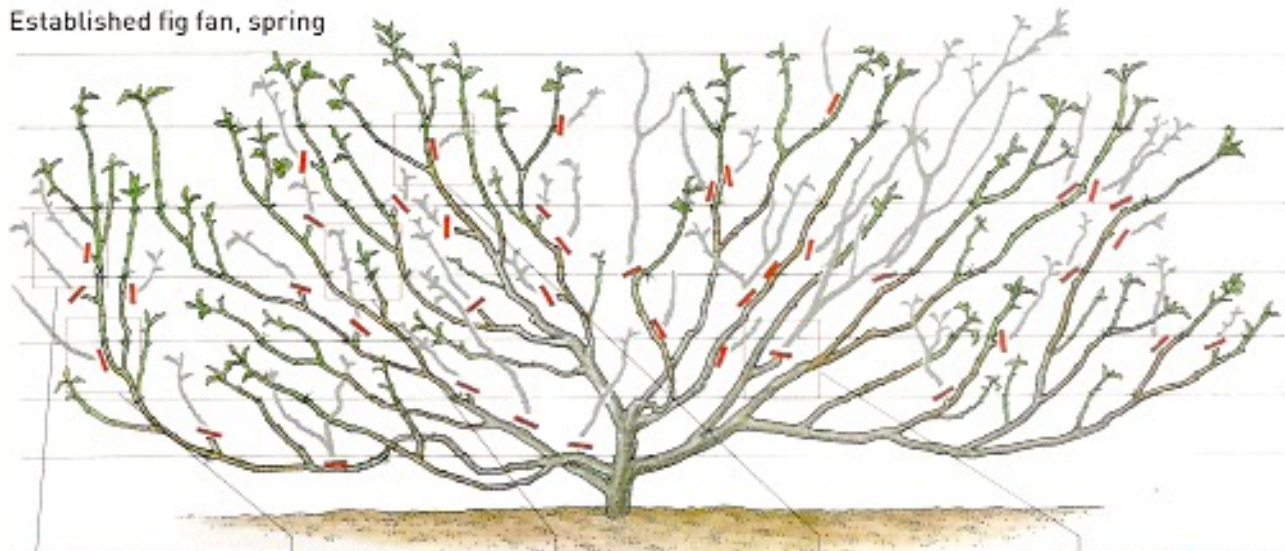
Develop the branch structure as for a peach fan (see p.134). If the laterals are sturdy, prune away only a few inches; prune weaker ones harder, to about half their length. Aim to produce about six main ribs on either side over two or three winters, tying in laterals to fill

out the framework. As soon as there are more laterals than are needed for tying in, start summer-pruning them to maintain the flat fan form and encourage fruit formation.

ESTABLISHED PRUNING

Fans must be routinely pruned in spring and, in cool climates, summer. When spring pruning, it is important to remove some older wood, and shorten a few young shoots back to one bud, in order to encourage new growth. However, any excessively vigorous, or in cool climates overcrowded, laterals should be removed.

Established fig fan, spring



1 Once any risk of prolonged frost has passed, cut any frost-damaged shoots back to their point of origin.

2 On each of the ribs, cut back two or three young shoots to one bud to encourage vigorous new shoots that will develop embryo fruits.

3 Tie the remaining well-positioned shoots in so that they are evenly spaced over the fan. In summer, pinch out new shoot tips to leave 5–6 leaves.

4 Prune shoots that grow towards the wall or across another shoot to their point of origin or to a well-placed sideshoot.

5 Cut back a proportion of old wood (perhaps one side branch on either side of the fan) to one bud or node and tie in newer shoots in its place.

GROWING FIGS IN CONTAINERS

Figs in pots, which can be moved into shelter for winter protection, can be grown as bushes, but with a clear trunk no more than 38cm (15in) high, to make them stable. They may also be grown in a multi-stemmed form, which is more compact. This is produced by cutting a two- or three-year-old fig down to ground level, once well-established in its pot, then selecting up to 10 of the best shoots that grow up from the base.

In subsequent springs, cut away three or four stems to the base (in later years, always removing the oldest or weakest), letting new growth replace them and removing any surplus basal growth. Shoots on these stems are summer-pruned as for any fig: remove only those that cross and rub against each other in the centre of the plant. These figs need light root-pruning every other spring (see Root pruning a container-grown shrub, p.154).



Container-grown fig

Prune at the base to maintain a multi-stemmed form. Summer-prune all sideshoots.