

Fresh Figs

Ficus carica is a member of the Moraceae (mulberry) family.

The fig is related to the tropical banyan and rubber trees, osage orange, mulberry, and che. The tree is deciduous, but is damaged by prolonged temperatures below 20°F. Its trunk has a swollen appearance, with heavy, succulent branches. Milky sap is present in stems, leaves, and unripe fruits. The sap's major constituent, Ficin, is harmful and irritating to skin and mouth.

Market Information

California produces the entire domestic U.S. crop of fresh figs. Because they are scarce and highly valued, figs are among the most profitable small farm crops for shipment to distant markets.

Use. Successful growers have long-term commitments from restaurants and other regular vendors, but must have easy access to an air freight service and must be able to produce a prime-quality pack over several months of summer and fall.

Figs are a demanding fresh fruit crop, and are grown almost exclusively as a small farm commodity. They are best suited to diversified farms where odd hours of labor are available for alternate-day pickings during summer.

Both purple- and green-fruited cultivars sell well. Unlike fresh figs, dried figs are produced in large-scale plantings where machine harvesting is most efficient.

Culture

Propagation and care. Plantings of one-half acre or less may use commercial nursery trees. For larger plantings use a commercial source for mother trees and take cuttings from these in following years. Do not collect cuttings from old, abandoned trees since they often carry fig mosaic virus. Stick foot-long cuttings into a prepared outdoor nursery bed. Transplant the next winter, with a tree spacing of at least 15 by 20 feet. Trim trees to 2 feet above the ground, and prune the following three winters to establish a stout scaffold and encourage branching.

Long outside and short inside pruning at waist height is best for hand-picked figs. This practice results in short trees that resemble head-trained



Green Ischia, a good fig for all California climates.
(Photo: C. Todd Kennedy)



Fruit color and texture change as figs ripen.
(Photo: Marita Cantwell de Trejo)

grapes, but it also delays initial fruit production by 3 to 4 years. Trees pruned in this manner require painting to prevent sunburn injury to the trunk and scaffold.

Irrigation is a must for good-quality crops, but fertilization is seldom necessary after initial planting. Overfertilizing leads to excessive extension growth with long internodes, a condition that must be corrected over several seasons.

Pests and disease. Figs are susceptible to vinegar flies and dried-fruit beetles, which affect marketability and introduce rot-causing microorganisms.

Orchard sanitation is critical. Do not plant figs near other fruit crops (particularly citrus) where fallen fruits are common. Harvest on a regular schedule. Collect and destroy any fallen or leftover fruits. Spraying may be necessary near citrus, peach, or plum orchards. Granular insecticides (applied in winter) are usually ineffective where nearby orchards serve as reservoirs for reinfestation. Epidemic souring of the fruit can be controlled only by rigorous spraying and fruit stripping over at least one season.

Strip and destroy all immature fruits immediately after the first frost to prevent *Botrytis* infection. Gophers can also damage fig orchards.

Harvest and postharvest handling. A fig tree has two harvest seasons: the Breba harvest in early summer and the main harvest in August. Breba figs may reach twice the size of main-crop figs and are very profitable, but they aren't as plentiful as main-crop figs. Many noncommercial cultivars do not produce the Breba crop.

Common fresh-market cultivars do not require pollination in order to produce fruits. The early Breba crop is borne on previous-year's growth, and

late-season figs are borne on current-year's growth. Dormant pruning will eliminate the following year's Breba crop and greatly stimulate vertical growth of the tree.

Fresh fig harvesting is labor-intensive. Fruits are tender and easily damaged by handling. Figs are fully ripe when the stem begins to relax and fruit hangs limp on the tree. For shipping, fruit must be picked immediately before this stage, when the skin yields to pressure or shows characteristic ripening cracks. Fruit must be picked directly into cell packs or baskets with no further handling. Use only single-layer flats, and hurry the fruit to refrigeration and to market. Bruising will reduce fresh figs to unsalable condition within a few minutes.

Cultivars. Choose a two-crop variety for fresh figs: Desert King, Mission, Green Ischia, or Kadota in coastal counties; Beall, Mission, Conadria, or Kadota in the Central Valley. White Genoa makes a profitable late crop (to December) in the north. *Brown Turkey* is the variety of choice in Southern California, ripening continuously from mid-June through September near Los Angeles. *Brown Turkey* can also produce a very late crop in the Imperial Valley.

Sources

Nursery stock

NOTE: Desert King, Kadota, Black Mission, Brown Turkey, and other varieties are available from most wholesale fruit tree growers, especially those with garden center accounts.

L. E. Cooke Co., 26333 Road 140, Visalia, CA 93277

Orange Country Nursery, 27291 Road 92, Visalia, CA 93277

More information

Federal-State Market News Service. 1989. *Los Angeles fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale market prices 1989*. California Department of Food and Agriculture Bureau of Market News and USDA Marketing Service.

Federal-State Market News Service. 1990. *San Francisco fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale market prices 1990*. California Department of Food and Agriculture Bureau of Market News and USDA Marketing Service.

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