

# FIGS

**F**igs are sub-tropical plants and need plenty of sun and warmth to grow and crop well outdoors in Britain. They can be grown outdoors in the south and west but further north need a very warm sheltered situation outdoors, otherwise they must be grown under glass. Root restriction should be provided to keep the tree compact and fruitful, as without it the fig is liable to grow rather large and remain vegetative.



**BROWN TURKEY** —Produces large oval fruits with very sweet, deep red flesh. It is the most reliable and widely grown variety. Heavy cropping. Ripens August to September. Self-fertile. R.H.S. Award of Garden Merit.

## CROPPING HABIT

It is important to understand the cropping habit of the fig. The fig bears two to three crops each year but only one ripens in our climate. The figs are formed in the axils of the leaves near the tips of the young shoots. It is the small pea-sized embryo figs formed in the autumn that overwinter to produce a crop of figs the following summer (August/September). The crop of figs produced in the spring and early summer never ripen and should be removed in November.

The fig does not produce visible flowers; they are enclosed within the centre of the fruit. Varieties grown in the U.K. do not require pollination and the fruits are seedless.

## TREE FORMS

Figs need warmth and sun and so are best grown as fan-trained trees against south or south-west facing walls or fences. In very favourable areas they can be grown as free-standing bush trees. They are excellent for pot culture.

# FIGS

## PLANTING & ROOT RESTRICTION

The fig should be planted in an open-based box which should be constructed of 60cm x 60cm (2ft x 2ft) square paving slabs or something similar, set into the ground with the rim about 2.5cm (1in) above ground level. The base of the box should be packed with brick rubble or broken tiles to a depth of about 22cm (9in) to provide drainage and to prevent the roots escaping. The box should be filled with a loam-based potting compost such as John Innes No. 3. Alternatively a pot of 35-45cm (14-18in) diameter can be used and plunged into the ground, provided it has adequate drainage holes. Another option is to plant the fig in a Root Control Bag (RCB). If grown against a wall, plant approximately 25cm (10in) away from the wall.

## PRUNING & TRAINING A FAN

Figs are usually obtained from the nursery as two year old plants. They may have a single stem or two or more side shoots.

In March following planting, those plants with a single stem should be pruned back to about 38cm (15in). Plants with side shoots should have their central leaders removed and their side shoots shortened by a quarter to a third, to stimulate the production of further shoots. During the summer the side shoots are tied to wires, spaced 30cm (12 in) apart in a similar way to a peach.

## PRUNING THE ESTABLISHED FAN

To encourage the formation of compact short-jointed shoots to carry the next year's figs, the growing points of every other shoot carried by the main framework branches should be removed once they have made four or five leaves, providing this is before the end of June. (see fig 52).

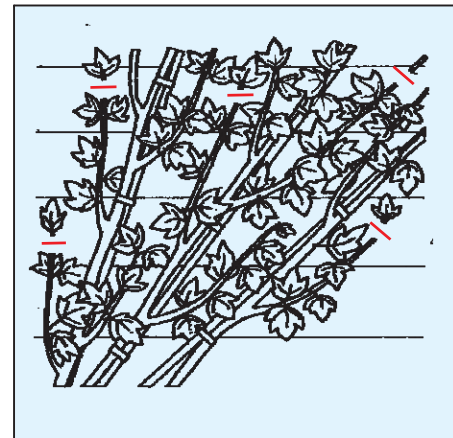


FIG. 52

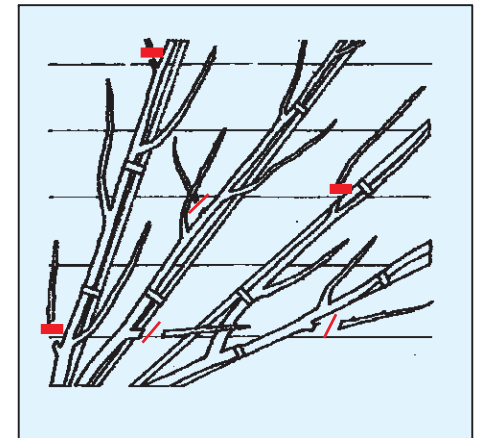


FIG. 53

# FIGS

In March or April after the worst frosts have passed, all dead, diseased and frost-damaged wood should be removed. Tie in the young shoots 15-30cm (6-12in) apart, cutting surplus shoots back to one bud.

In November, half the shoots that carried fruits during the summer should be pruned back to 2.5cm (1in). This will encourage new growth from the base the following spring. All the remaining shoots should be tied in parallel with the wall, approximately 20-30cm (9-12in) apart. Any growth in between should be cut back to source to avoid overcrowding. (see fig 53)

## GROWING FIGS IN CONTAINERS

Container grown figs are best grown as a bush on a short stem. It is best to select a plant with three or four branches coming from the stem around 38cm (15in) from the ground. Alternatively, cut back single stem plants to encourage branching. In the late winter cut back these branches by a half to develop a compact framework.

In the spring remove crossing and frost damaged shoots to maintain an open centre. Prune back over-long and bare branches where necessary to 5cm (2in) to encourage the formation of new shoots. In the summer pinch out any new shoots at 5 or 6 leaves to encourage fruit formation.

## MANURING

In March each year, broadcast over the rooting area a compound fertilizer as recommended for apples. When the tree is carrying a heavy crop, a liquid feed high in potash, such as a tomato fertilizer, should be applied every two weeks until the fruit begins to ripen.

Pot-grown trees should be fed weekly during the growing season, alternating a liquid feed high in potash, such as tomato fertilizer with a balanced feed.

## WINTER PROTECTION

In colder areas and in severe winters, the embryo figs can be damaged by frosts. Fig trees can be protected against frost by using a cover of bracken or straw held in place by a large mesh net. This should be put on in November and removed once growth starts in late April and May.

Pot-grown trees can be placed in a frost-free place such as a shed, garage or unheated greenhouse over winter. Alternatively, if this is not available, the container can be lagged with bubble wrap, sacking or some other suitable insulation and placed against a sheltered side of the house, away from the prevailing wind. Pack around the branches with straw and cover with hessian or horticultural fleece. Remove after the danger of frost is passed but before bud burst.

# FIGS

## HARVESTING

Figs are ready for harvesting when they become soft and hang downwards. Small splits develop in the skin and a drop of nectar may be exuded from the eye of the fruit. They should be inspected regularly, as ripe figs will soon rot on the tree. Once picked they will keep for 2-3 weeks if kept somewhere cool.

## PESTS, DISEASES & DISORDERS

Squirrels and birds are the most serious pests. The trees are generally free from disease but occasionally suffer from Coral Spot (dead twigs become covered in pink pustules). Diseased twigs should be cut back to a healthy bud and the prunings should be burned.