

Growing Figs on Long Island

There is nothing as delicious as ripe, fresh-picked figs. Growing figs here on Long Island takes a little extra effort, but the reward is worth it.

Location & Temperature

Figs require warm temperatures both day and night for good fruit development and ripening. Choose a protected southern exposure free from late spring frosts.

Soil

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

Watering and Fertilizing

Figs grow best in moist soil. Mulching with an organic material such as shredded cedar bark or pine bark is a great way to keep the roots cool and moist, and to prevent weed growth. Fertilize figs with a well-balanced organic fertilizer. Read & follow the label directions.



Harvesting

Pick figs when they are soft and fall easily into your hand. If they exude white sap they are not yet 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 and other goodies.

Pruning

- It is best to cut your fig tree back heavily in spring for 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 throughout the first season.
- During the next winter select three to eight vigorous, widely spaced shoots to serve as the main 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.
- After their second year in the ground, figs can be pruned 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.



Winter Protection

Beginning around Thanksgiving, when all leaves and fruit have dropped it is time to start tying up the branches. Prior to tying, some selective pruning can be done if needed.



- 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 soft, strong rope made of natural fibers.
- Let the plant stay tied up this way for a few weeks. Then, around the first week of December, it is time to 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 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 so 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 all of the wrapping is done, mound soil up around the base to further insulate and protect your fig tree from cold air. You might put a pail over the top to prevent rainwater from getting inside. Do not use plastic for wrapping any part of the tree. Water condenses and freezes under plastic wrappings, damaging the branches.

Spring Awakening

In the spring, on a cloudy day after danger from frost has 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.

pH Testing

Lime is used to raise the pH of soil if it is below the desired range. Bring a half-cup of DRY soil to our Garden Information Desk; we will gladly test your soil's pH for FREE & the results are available while you wait. pH meters and kits are also available for sale for at-home, on-the-spot testing.



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