

TREE FRUIT: FIGS

FIGS

Figs are a strange fruit — their cultivation involves techniques which you will find nowhere else in this book. It is not even easy to classify them. Tree fruit in this and several other textbooks — soft fruit in some catalogues.

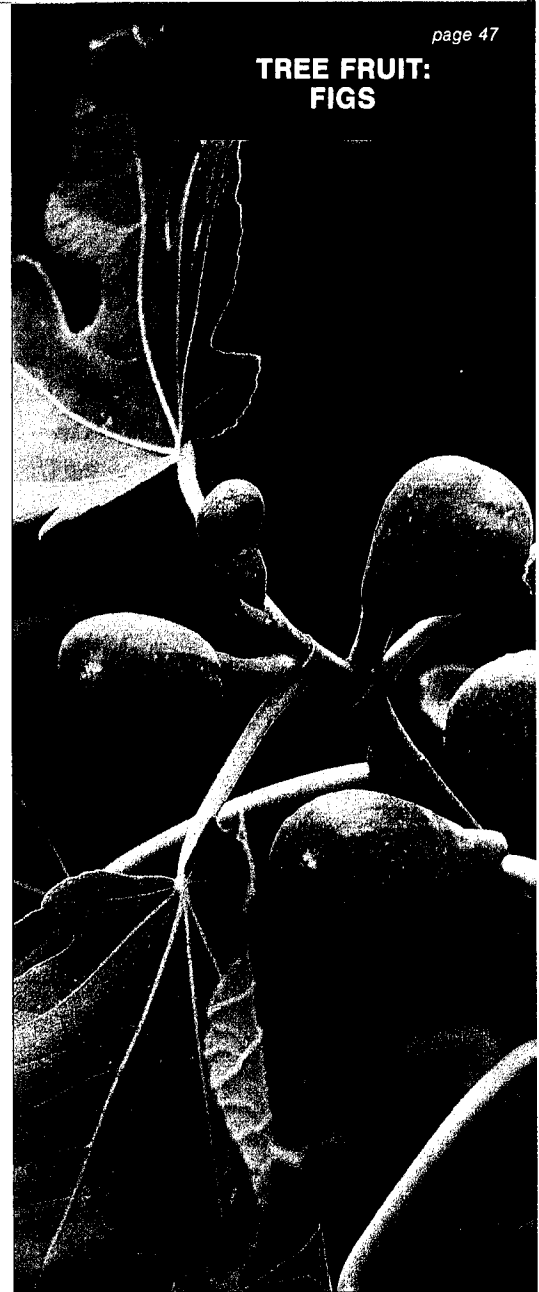
Figs are quite easy to grow. They are not grafted on to rootstocks and they do not need a pollination partner. Any soil will do as long as it drains reasonably freely, and the trees can withstand the winters in southern and western counties. Spraying is not necessary as pest and disease attack are rare. This ease, however, only applies to the tree as an ornamental plant — it is difficult to induce a Fig tree to produce a worthwhile crop every year. Read this section before deciding to buy one — like most gardeners you will probably decide that a Peach, Grape vine or Melon would be a much more desirable exotic.

The first problem concerns root growth — if left unrestricted the tree grows too vigorously and few fruit develop. To prevent this the roots are restricted by planting in a 15 in. pot or in a lined pit — see below. Pot-grown Figs can be trained as a fan against a wall or maintained as a dwarf bush — bush Figs can be kept in a greenhouse or else left outdoors for most of the year and then brought indoors during the leafless period when frosts threaten.

A sheltered wall facing the South or South-West is the place for a Fig. Greenhouse culture is feasible — you will get two crops instead of one each year if you can maintain a temperature of 55°F from January onwards. But do think carefully — Figs are leafy and cast a lot of shade.

Another problem is winter protection for outdoor crops. This year's Figs were present last year as tiny (embryo) fruits. These embryo fruits and young shoots must be individually covered during winter.

During the growing season the crop needs regular attention. Frequent watering is essential — during dry weather in summer you will have to irrigate twice a week. Shoots have to be pruned in June and unwanted Figs have to be removed in late September — see page 48. Obviously Figs are *not* for the lazy gardener, but they are a worthy challenge for the keen gardener who wants to see just how delicious a home-grown Fig can be. There are two types — the green varieties which have greenish skin and pale flesh, and the purple varieties with brown or purple skin and red flesh. For outdoor cultivation the reliable *Brown Turkey* is the usual choice — under glass the superb-tasting *Bourjasotte Grise* is worth trying.



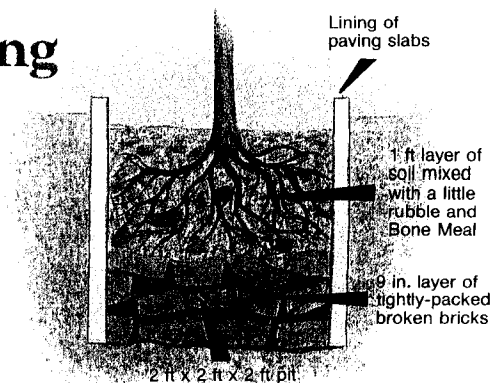
Planting

Choose a well-sheltered spot which is exposed to the sun. Plant fans 12–15 ft apart. November to March is the recommended planting period — March is the best time.

The traditional method is to construct a Fig pit, as shown here. An easier method is to plant in a large tub or a 15 in. pot. Make sure that the container has adequate drainage holes, crock well and use a soil-based compost. In both pits and pots you should plant very firmly.

The pot can be stood in a sunny sheltered part of the garden, to be moved into a shed when frost threatens. If the Fig is to be grown against a wall as a fan then the pot should be sunk up to its rim in the earth close to the wall.

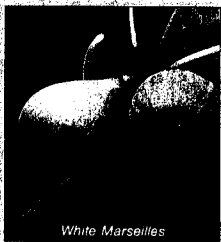
Repotting will be necessary every 2–3 years — do this in late winter.



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Brown Turkey



White Marseilles

Varieties A-Z

BOURJASOTTE GRISE

This one is strictly for growing in the greenhouse — it is too tender for outdoors. The fruits are rounder than the other varieties listed here and the flavour is better — probably the richest and sweetest Fig you can grow. Good for pot cultivation.

BROWN TURKEY

For many years this has been the No.1 choice — it is suitable for outdoors or under glass. A reliable and heavy cropper producing oval fruit — the red flesh has a rich and sweet flavour. Usually the only Fig offered in the catalogue.

BRUNSWICK

Not as popular as *Brown Turkey*, but it does come next in the rankings. An oval-shaped fruit like *Brown Turkey*, but it is larger and also ripens about a couple of weeks earlier. The flavour is very good but the tree is not as reliable as its rival and the yields are lower.

WHITE MARSEILLES

This variety ripens at about the same time as *Brown Turkey*, but that is the only similarity. The fruit of *White Marseilles* is distinctly Pear-shaped, and the whitish flesh is almost transparent. It has a good reputation for pot culture.

Type: Green Fig

Fruit size: Medium-large

Skin colour: Pale green

Picking time: September

Type: Purple Fig

Fruit size: Medium-large

Skin colour: Brownish-red.
Blue bloom

Picking time: August-September

Type: Green Fig

Fruit size: Very large

Skin colour: Greenish-yellow,
flushed with brown

Picking time: Mid August

Type: Green Fig

Fruit size: Large

Skin colour: Pale green

Picking time: August-September

Pruning

Buy a 2 or 3 year old partly trained tree. For a bush follow the training procedure for Apple bushes — see page 22. For a fan follow the training procedure for Peach fans — see page 44.

Pruning of established bushes and fans takes place in June. All young shoots should be pinched back so that only 5 leaves remain — this will encourage new fruiting shoots to form. In the case of fans tie these shortened growths to the wires.

Thin out the fruits in late September. The embryo Figs which should be retained are close to the end of the shoots and are about pea-sized. These will develop into fruit for picking next year. At this late September stage all the ripe fruit will have been picked, but you will also find some cherry-sized Figs which will not ripen — remove them.

In spring clean up the tree. Remove branches killed by frost and on a fan remove buds which are pointing directly inwards or outwards from the wall.

Seasonal care

Winter protection of young shoots and embryo fruits is vital. Move a pot-grown plant into a shed, garage or greenhouse. For plants which can't be moved indoors it will be necessary to tie a covering of straw or bracken loosely around the tender parts. Put on this cover in late autumn — remove gradually during April and May.

Regular watering is essential as the tree has restricted root growth. The root ball must never be allowed to dry out — adequate moisture is especially important when the fruits are swelling in early summer. Watering can be reduced as harvesting approaches.

In late summer it is usually necessary to hang a net over the tree to protect the ripening fruit from birds.

Feeding & Mulching

Do not overfeed. Apply a light dressing of Growmore in spring and spread an organic mulch over the soil surface. When the fruits start to swell apply a high-potash liquid fertilizer.

Picking & Storage

A Fig is ready for harvest when the stalk weakens and the fully-coloured fruit hangs downwards. There will be other tell-tale signs — the skin may be cracked or there may be a drop of nectar at the base. Gather the fruit carefully — it will keep in a cool place for several weeks. Figs can be dried in the airing cupboard. Turn daily — drying will take 4-7 days.

MULBERRIES

The place for a Mulberry tree is in a large lawn where its gnarled branches and stately head can be admired. It is remarkably trouble-free and the flowers are self-fertile, and harvesting couldn't be easier. All you have to do is spread a sheet below the branches in August or September when the fruits have started to fall. Shake the branches gently, and on to the sheet drop the large Raspberry-like fruits — dark red or nearly black with a sweetish but tart flavour. Eat fresh or use for making jam, jellies or wine.

All of this sounds most appealing, but do think of the drawbacks before buying a Mulberry for your garden. Space can be a problem — the eventual height and spread will be about 20 ft. You will need patience as well as a large garden — growth is slow in the early years and the tree is slow to produce leaves in the spring. Worst of all, you will have to wait about seven years before you can taste the first fruits. Locality can also be a problem — Mulberries are disappointing in shady northern gardens and in heavy, water-retentive soil.

Still, Mulberries have been grown in Britain for hundreds of years and they are still worth considering for southern areas. Buy a 3-5 year old trained tree and plant in March — choose a Black Mulberry and not the insipid-tasting White Mulberry. Stake for the first few years and prune as little as possible — the branches bleed when cut. During the first two winters shorten some of the lateral branches not wanted for the main framework — in subsequent years merely cut out dead, broken or crossing branches in winter. With old trees the brittle branches may break — propping up with forked poles may be necessary.

QUINCES

Even if you have no use for the fruit it is worthwhile growing a Quince tree. The gnarled and contorted trunk and branches, the grey bark and the leathery, dark green leaves give the tree a distinctly oriental look. In June the attractive white or pale pink blossoms appear, 1½-2 in. in diameter, and then come the large (5-6 in. long) fruits. Pear- or Apple-shaped and aromatic, but too tart and gritty to be eaten raw. Quinces make delicious jellies and also pie-fillings when combined with Apple. The word 'marmalade' is derived from *marmalo* — the Portuguese name for Quince.

This is a plant for the South and Midlands. A moist soil is preferred and you will need sufficient space for a tree which will grow about 12 ft high. Plant between November and March, or any time of the year if it is a container-grown specimen. Choose a 2-4 year old trained plant — *Vranja* (large, Pear-shaped) is the popular variety, but you may also find *Champion* (large, Apple-shaped) and *Portugal* (large, early, orange, Pear-shaped). The popular shrub known as Japanese Quince or Japonica is much smaller and quite different to a true Quince.

During the first few years cut back the main leaders in winter so as to remove about a half of the previous year's growth. Keep the centre of the bush open. Once the mature framework is established, prune as little as possible — simply remove dead or crossing branches in winter.

Pick the fruits in October before the first frosts arrive. Store them in trays in a cool, dark place until the Quinces change from green to yellow. This will take 4-8 weeks.