

Figs May Be Figments This Year

By Jo Anna Natale, Fairfax Master Gardener

There were many reasons why my Italian father was unhappy when his only daughter left upstate New York to move to Virginia, but one prospect brightened his gloom: "In Virginia, you can grow figs," he said, blue eyes sparking with possibility.

Much to the envy of northern gardeners like my Dad, we can indeed grow figs in Virginia—usually without much effort. If we choose the right varieties of this prized Mediterranean fruit and conditions are right, figs burst onto our late-summer and fall scene with a sweet, if fleeting, ferocity.

But the last two years have been anything but usual. "For 20 years, it was spaced-out bliss" for fig-growers, says Michael McConkey, owner of Edible Landscaping in Afton, Va., where he tests, propagates, and sells fig and other fruit trees. "You'd have so many figs, you couldn't pick them all. Now, with the last two winters and their single-digit temperatures, everybody's figs have died back."

The unhappy result: Whereas in better years, we'd be readying the prosciutto to wrap and the mascarpone to top our incoming fig harvests, this year we are praying — praying that warm weather lasts long enough for us to taste a ripe fig or two.

What happened?

Figs plants (*figus carica*) hate harsh winds and cold temperatures (think below 20 degrees F) — exactly the sort we endured this past winter and the one before. Exposed to such conditions, figs die back to the ground, especially when plants are young, unprotected, or of less-hardy varieties. Often, as with my three stout bushes, the root structures survive, and new shoots appear in spring. But that sometimes signals false hope. Although the plant is still alive (the good news), the figs that appear on this fresh greenery do so later in the season and often don't get time to ripen before sun and warmth disappear.

To combat dieback in subsequent seasons, there are a few things you can do. First, if you are beginning anew, make sure you choose the right varieties of fig to plant. Plants that produce early or mid-season are best for our region. That way, even if dieback occurs, there is more of a chance that figs produced on new growth will get adequate time in the sun to ripen. While there are scores of varieties, McConkey particularly recommends Hardy Chicago and Celeste for our area.

Next, be sure to plant your fig in a good spot. According to the National Gardening Association, figs grow best in well-drained soil (amended with compost or manure) that sees at least eight hours of sun per day. If you can plant your fig next to a house or other structure with a southern exposure, so much the better, as this will help keep it warm and protected from wind. As always, test your soil, and then amend it to achieve a pH of 6.0 to 6.5, the level figs prefer.

May is the best time to plant, but if you're eager to replace a dead fig or looking to jump on the fig bandwagon sooner rather than later, you can plant in the fall. If doing so, though, McConkey recommends that you start with larger stock, at least 3-gallon-size. That sturdier, more sizeable root structure will help sustain the plant through winter.

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Photo: Clemson University

Figs require lots of time in the sun to ripen

Another option is to plant figs in containers and to shelter them in a garage during winter. You'll need to plant your fig in a 15-gallon container, at the very least, and put the pot on casters to help you move it. Petite Negri works well in a container in our region, McConkey says, as long as it is overwintered in a garage that doesn't get below 20 degrees F, and you give it the occasional watering.

Bundle up the brush

If you are trying to protect figs you already have in-ground from dieback, McConkey says to take a cue from northern gardeners and increase the "R-value," or insulation, around figs. He recommends a 3-foot tall pile of mulch around figs, placed in late December to discourage mulch-happy rodents from tunneling and munching on fig wood. As my inventive Italian relatives can attest, other methods for protecting figs can be effective as well — everything from wrapping plants in old carpet scraps, burlap, or quilts to bending and burying the branches.



Photo: by author

Lots of leaves but few figs appear on new growth

With kinder, warmer winters, the figs should be fine. But if dieback occurs again after the coming winter, work with the fresh growth that springs from the ground to maximize your harvest. In early June, prune out the suckers to a hearty five or six. "You'll get more oompah-pah that way, than if you let everybody grow," McConkey says. Even so, it may take two or three years of cooperative winters to get a good harvest.

As for the copious amounts of rain we have had this season, McConkey says it is not a problem—so far. Fig trees and shrubs like moisture to grow, but dislike too much of it as the figs attempt to ripen. Should our soggy summer continue, we will face a new disappointment, McConkey says: "The fruits will split, sour, and be a mess" – and any dreams of homemade fig preserves this fall will fade away.

References

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