

TITLE: The common fig tree (*Ficus carica*) is the most popular species of fig for home gardeners because its flowers do not require pollination to yield figs.

It is the only member of the *Ficus* genus grown for its fruit.

Description: Though figs can be trained to either tree or bush form, the single-stem tree form is not practical for east Tennessee. Fig plants are often killed back to the ground during the winter in Tennessee, making the tree form difficult to maintain.

(Zone 8 or above is needed to grow the tree form.)

Objective(s): Learn how, and when, to prune your fig bush.



WHAT: While there are hundreds of cultivars of fig, about 60 varieties will survive an east TN winter. You don't have to worry about pollination, as the varieties that will grow here are all the common fig (*Ficus carica*) which do not require cross-pollination. In east TN, “Celeste”, “Brown Turkey”, “Hardy Chicago” varieties are readily available, and produce well when planted well.

WHY: If you let your fig grow like a tree, it can freeze back to the ground during a winter freeze or polar vortex. While the roots will still be alive, you will have to cut down the entire tree (leaving the roots to regrow). Depending on the size of the tree, this could require hiring a tree service.

WHEN: Figs should be pruned while dormant, but because of their sensitivity to cold, they should be pruned at or near the end of the dormant period. This is usually the second half of March for east TN.

WHERE: Figs do best in full sun and well-drained soil. Avoid planting them in the coldest microclimate within your garden. **Do not plant a fig within 20 feet of a building or other structure.**

HOW:

- Choose 5-8 main stems, reasonably spaced to allow airflow and sunlight into the middle of the bush. There should be enough space so that the main stems can grow to 3” – 4” in diameter and not rub or interfere with each other.
- Tie something on these 5-8 stems (temporarily) to identify these as the stems you are keeping. Remove all other stems as close to the ground as possible.
- Remove the Four D's from the stems you are keeping: prune out all dead, damaged, diseased wood, and dysfunctional branches – such as off low-growing lateral branches.
- Do not leave bare, unproductive stubs when you prune. These stubs are entry points for wood decay organisms.
- Make all pruning cuts back to a bud or branch.
- If more branching is desired, remove about 1/3 of the length of last year's growth
- If you prune too early – or there is a late frost/freeze – you will need to do a second, light pruning to remove any tips that got frostbitten.

SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT POINTS:

- Figs require little pruning — just enough to keep growth within bounds, to keep the crown open to sunlight and air, and to remove dead wood.
- Pruning should be done during the winter months, preferably after the coldest weather is past but before growth starts in the spring.
- Though fig plants can be trained to either a tree or a bush form, **the tree form is not practical for most of east TN**. In our area, fig plants are occasionally frozen back, making the tree form difficult to maintain.
- During the late winter after the first growing season, select five to eight vigorous, widely spaced shoots to serve as leaders.
 - Remove all other shoots.
 - Be sure the leaders are far enough apart to grow to 3 to 4 inches in diameter without crowding each other. (If they are too close together, the leaders cannot grow thick enough to support themselves and their crop and tend to fall over or split off under stress of high winds. If this happens, remove the damaged leader and select a new one late the next winter by choosing one of the many suckers that arise annually.)
- Beginning the second year after planting, and continuing each year:
 - If more branching is desired, head back the bush each spring after danger of frost is past but before growth has started. Do this by removing about one-third to one-half the length of the annual growth.
 - Also, prune out all dead wood, and remove branches that interfere with growth of the leaders. Cut off low-growing lateral branches and all sucker growth that is not needed for replacement of broken leaders. Make all pruning cuts back to a bud or branch.

Additional Resources / References:

"Figs in the Home Planting", University of TN publication SP3071

"Home Garden Figs", University of Georgia Extension, circular 945

[https://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=C945&title=Home Garden Figs](https://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=C945&title=Home%20Garden%20Figs)

"FIG", Clemson Cooperative Extension, Factsheet HGIC 1353

"Fig Production Guide", Alabama Cooperative Extension

[/https://www.aces.edu/blog/topics/crop-production/fig-production-guide/](https://www.aces.edu/blog/topics/crop-production/fig-production-guide/)

"Figs", University of Maryland Extension Home & Garden Information Center

<https://extension.umd.edu/hgic/topics/figs>

Knox County Master Gardeners website: www.knoxcountymastergardener.org

Knox County Master Gardeners Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/KnoxCountyMG>

Ask-a-Master Gardener / Knox County Extension Helpline: (865) 215-2340

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