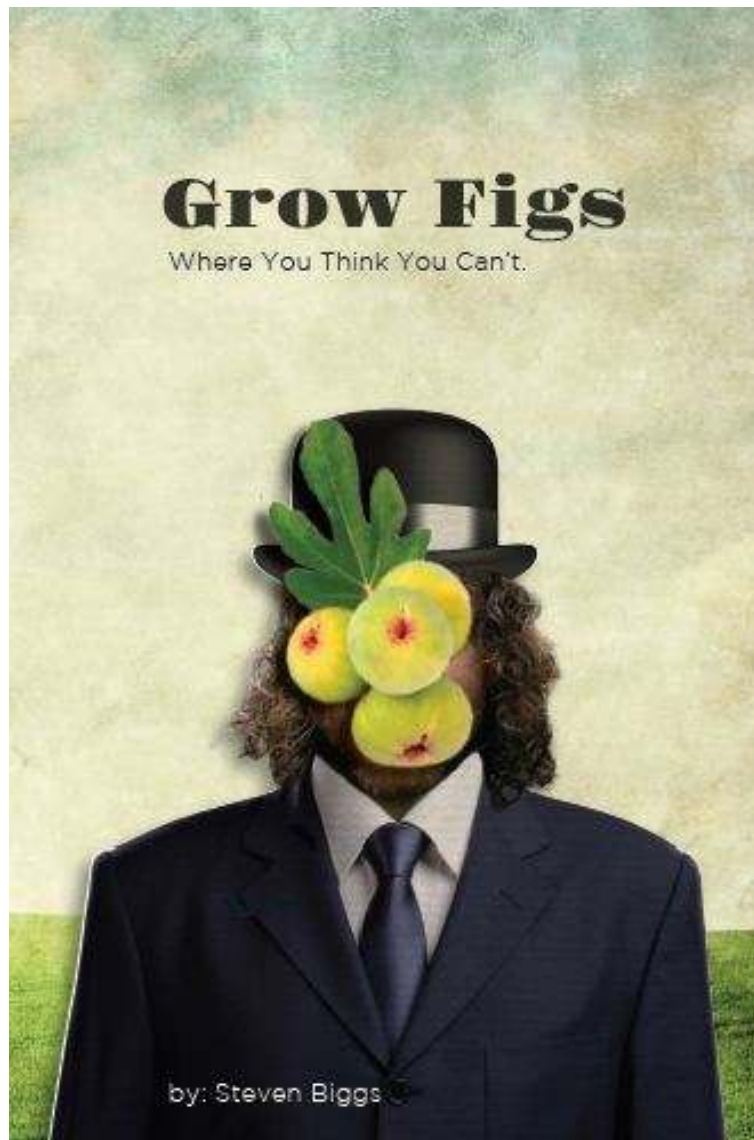


OVERWINTERING FIG PLANTS

Strategies for Northern Gardeners

Excerpts from the book *Grow Figs Where You Think You Can't*

Visit the www.grow-figs.com blog for more tips and ideas.



Winner, 2012 Silver Award

Garden Writers Association

OVERWINTERING trees in colder climates. Over the winter, your fig trees will need no more care than a potted houseplant—and probably less, because they go dormant.

I break down overwintering tactics into two broad groups: indoors and outdoors.

Easy Because Figs go Dormant

Fig trees are deciduous and drop their leaves after first frost. This is great news for gardeners because it means we can keep them over the winter even if we don't have a bright, hot greenhouse. While they're dormant, they don't need light or much heat. In areas where figs won't normally overwinter outdoors, this dormancy means they can be stored inside, or, in many cases, outdoors with minimal protection.

The key is to keep the plant in a dormant state as long as possible, by storing it in a cool, dark place. Active growth indoors, in low-light conditions, will give weak, lanky growth.

Getting Ready for Winter

With the arrival of fall, decrease watering potted plants to allow the soil to become fairly dry as plants drop their leaves and become dormant. The plants require less water as they go dormant—and sopping wet soil could cause root rot.

Get Over It

It will break your heart...but there will be figs that don't ripen. As you tuck in your trees for the winter, remove any remaining figs that are bigger than the size of a pea.

Planning to keep your figs growing all winter? I don't recommend it.

Think you're going to grow your fig in a window over the winter? Think again. Window light just doesn't compare to outdoor light, so you're likely to get lanky growth. Besides, with dormant plants you don't need to worry about bugs...while with actively growing plants you do.

And In the Spring...

In the spring, frost won't hurt your trees if the buds haven't broken (meaning leaves and breba figs haven't started to grow); but if they have, beware! A frost will probably damage them and may affect your crop. One year I moved my figs to a sunroom in the spring after they started to grow before I could put them outside. The problem was that I forgot to turn on the heat one night when the temperature dipped below freezing. Those tender new shoots were all frost-bitten the next morning...affecting my breba and main crops.

This might leave you wondering when to take your fig trees outside, or when to unearth or unwrap trees that are under cover. How's this for an ambiguous answer: It depends. It depends on whether you're willing to rush them under cover if there's a chance of frost. If you're not willing to schlepp around plants, hold off. But, of course, the sooner you get them growing, the sooner you'll have figs... and the more likely you are to have main crop figs ripening before winter returns.

Overwintering Indoors

We'll start with a look at what you can do indoors. Pot-grown fig trees can be stored indoors, in a dormant state. You simply allow the plant to become dormant (drop leaves) before bringing it indoors. You want somewhere cool and dark, so your plant doesn't decide to grow before you want it to.

If you have an attached garage, cold cellar, or unheated basement, these can all be good places to overwinter the plant. Ideally, the temperature in there should be between 7°C (45°F) and about -3°C (27°F).

The KEY is to keep the plant in a dormant state because growth indoors, in low-light conditions, will be weak and lanky. Cool temperature and low light levels—better yet, darkness—help to keep the trees in a state of dormancy as long as possible.

The dormant plants will still need a bit of water from time to time. Not too much, though—they can be easily killed by overwatering when they're in this state.

Dry Soil Tip

Soiless mixes containing a lot of peat contract when dry. This causes a problem when you water, because the water will not soak into the soil, but simply run down the gap around the inside of the pot. Before watering, push down the mix around the edges of the pot. You can also make a hole in the soil with a stick and fill it with sand—creating a channel into which water can penetrate.

Indoors in Greenhouse

I want to reiterate that you do not need a greenhouse to grow figs in your coldish climate.

But some people use them... I saw the hand-painted roadside stand and had to stop. Luckily, my friend Donna, who was travelling with me, is also a plant buff, so she didn't mind stopping for what would likely be a long visit. The sign said simply, "Fig Trees for Sale."

The owner came out, got us past the barking dog, and took us to a line of potted fig trees that he was selling. He had labelled the varieties with the names of the places from which he got them in his native Italy.

Me being me, of course, it wasn't enough to just see the trees for sale and buy a couple (which, of course, I did). I needed to know how he overwintered them. But the information wasn't forthcoming.

Finally, after a lot of questions and probing on my part, he gruffly motioned to follow him in a way that gave me the feeling he didn't do this for any old visitor. We were about to be shown the central hub of his fig operation.

In the greenhouses behind his house he had space to overwinter these pot-grown figs. But he also had in-ground trees—sprawling specimens with thick, elephantine bark-covered stems and a canopy that, in many places, made me feel as though I were on the forest floor.

He fed us fig after ripe fig (and cactus pear too) as he told us that the trees had been in the ground here for many years—and that if he were to do it again he might do it differently. He lamented having put them in the ground because they were so vigorous and needed so much pruning.

And that's the problem when you grow figs in the ground in a greenhouse: They become wild and unrestrained. Many texts prescribe making a pit, lining the sides with concrete blocks, and then putting crushed rubble at the bottom. This restrains the root system, and gives a tree that won't be all leaf and no fruit. It's almost like an in-ground pot! But, whew, that's a lot of work.

Indoors in a Shed

I no longer haul my fig trees into the unheated basement washroom for overwintering, I've found a better way. When cold weather arrives, I dig them and their pots out of the garden bed and move them over into a large shed. It's insulated and has a heater that keeps temperatures from falling too low.

Indoors in a Garage

If you have an attached garage, that could be a perfect spot for overwintering your fig. But if your garage is detached, the temperature isn't moderated by the house, so it might get too cold.

If you use a Greenhouse

If you have a greenhouse and plant your tree in the ground, restrict the root run so that you don't get excessive growth at the expense of fruit. Dig a pit approximately 60 cm (two feet) deep and wide, and line it with upright patio stones. At the base of the pit, use a layer of broken stone or brick to allow drainage while restricting excessive root growth.

Here is a greenhouse that is kept around the freezing mark most of the winter, and then heated up for seedlings in late winter. This way fig plants start growing a bit earlier.

My shed has insulated walls and a heater that keeps it just above freezing. That's actually warmer than needed for figs—but my Brugmansia plants are also in there and don't take well to freezing.





Once buds “break” (once leaves open) in the spring, your tree is frost-sensitive. If your fig plants awaken early, you can use clear plastic to create a temporary spring greenhouse that you can remove once the risk of frost is gone.

Early Risers

Wake up a napping toddler too soon and you’ve got a cranky kid on your hands; wake up your dormant fig tree too soon and you’ve got a problem! With toddlers, you’re worried about keeping things quiet. With fig trees, you don’t want too much action—light, heat, or water—or they may snap out of dormancy and begin to grow.

Coming out of dormancy too early means trouble: Before the buds broke (the leaves opened), your tree was frost hardy; a frost—a drop below freezing—was no problem. Once a tree’s out of dormancy, frost is a problem.

Remember, in-ground figs can take temperatures down to about -10°C (14°F). But once those buds break, your tree is now frost-sensitive. A frost wouldn’t likely kill the whole tree, but it would kill all those tender green leaves, shoots, and wee figs tucked in with them.

So now you have a tree that’s growing, but can’t take outdoor conditions. And if you were storing your tree indoors as a dormant tree, you probably don’t have a greenhouse or solarium, where you could put it now. And if you put this now-growing tree in an inadequately bright spot, the growth will be lanky.

Moral of the story? Try to keep your trees dormant as long as possible.

Watering Dormant Figs Indoors *Indoors*

Dormant figs are more likely to die from overwatering than from underwatering.

While plants are dormant, it's important to strike the right balance in watering: enough that the dormant trees don't dry out and die, yet not too much that the roots rot. I usually check them about once a month.

If you're not sure whether your plant should be watered, stick your finger in the soil and feel around, digging down a couple of inches to feel if it's moist.

You want to keep your plant dormant, which requires cool, dark conditions.

COOL + DARK = DORMANT

Overwintering Outdoors

When we overwinter figs outdoors, we're taking advantage of the fact that the ground remains warmer than air—something we can use to keep our plants from suffering the extreme cold of the air temperatures.

In Doubt about Outdoors?

Not all of the outdoor methods will work in all cold climates. Instead of trying to pigeonhole individual techniques into specific growing zones, I've decided to let you do the ground work here. There are so many microclimates that there's no way to spell out all options for all areas. If in doubt, start by overwintering your fig plants indoors. Then, find people in your area growing figs outdoors and question them relentlessly. Trust me, such people exist, and now that you're thinking about figs, you'll start to notice them.

Because their roots are protected in the ground, fig plants that have been hardened off can survive temperatures down to about -10°C (14°F), compared with about -7°C (19°F) for pot-grown plants. (Ability to withstand cold temperatures, though, is not the same for every variety.)

The methods below work for fig trees, as well as bushes—with one exception: The A-frame can only be used for bush-form figs, because trees tend to be too rigid to

withstand such extreme bending. Which methods are suitable in your neck of the woods will depend on how cold it gets where you live. For example, the Mummy Method (see below) isn't reliable where I live.

Outdoors - Buried

When it comes to overwintering figs outdoors, the method most people seem to know is burying them. Earlier, I mentioned fig orchards on the outskirts of Paris, France. This is the sort of technique that was used there. I call it the graveyard method.

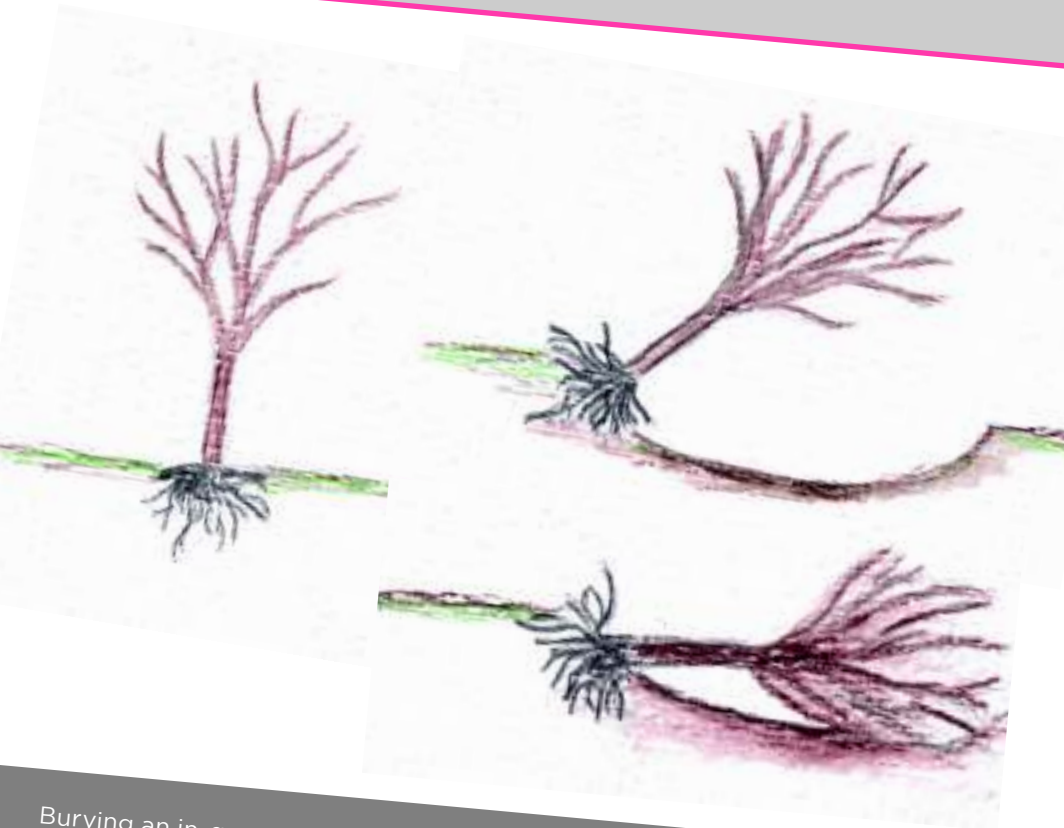
I used to bury my lone fig tree, but this method is no longer practicable given the number of trees I have. But don't discount this method if you haven't a suitable spot indoors for dormant plants.

If you dig the hole deep enough, you can cover the plant with a layer of soil, although this is overkill in my area. A mulching material suffices here. If in

doubt, deeper with more mulching and soil over top will be safer for your fig.

Here's what you do:

- Dig a trench on one side of your fig. It should be as long as the tree is tall. Where I live all that is needed is a trench just deep enough to bury it;
- Tie together the branches once your tree or bush is dormant (this is so you don't need to dig as wide a hole);
- About 30 cm (12 inches) from the trunk on the side opposite to your trench, chop down with a spade to sever the roots, which will make it easier to bend over the plant;
- Bend the plant so it lies in the trench, then weigh it down with something heavy or peg it into place;
- Fill the trench with a thick layer of mulch, and cover with a tarp (you can cap this with a board and soil for additional insulation if you like).



Burying an in-ground fig plant. Dig a trench on one side of your fig, and then on opposite side to your trench, chop down with a spade to sever the roots, which will make it easier to bend over the plant. Bend the plant, and then weigh it down with something heavy, and then cover it with a thick layer of mulch, and a tarp.

Outdoors – Above Ground (Frame Up)

If you're not up to digging holes every year, there is an easier way! In my home town is a fig grower whose beloved in-ground fig tree has a metal frame (made of one-inch metal tubing) around the outside of its canopy—and in the winter he slaps insulated walls and a roof onto the frame, and puts electrical heating coil around the base of the plant.

Outdoors – Above Ground (Mummy Method)

In areas slightly warmer than mine, but where figs are not fully hardy, some people wrap their fig trees in an insulating material along with a waterproof layer. Think of a fig mummy!

Here's an example of how it works:

- Tie the branches together, pulling them inwards so the plant isn't as spreading;
- On a dry day, once cold weather has arrived, wrap it;
- Use burlap, tied or pinned into place;
- You can then make additional insulation layers, using things such as brown paper and old carpet;
- Mound soil around the base of the plant; and
- Some people use tar paper as the final garment, avoiding plastic, which doesn't breathe.

I've heard of growers who wrap snow fencing about 30 cm (12 inches) out from the plant, filling the area between the fence and the tree with leaves or straw. They then cover the whole thing with a tarp.

Outdoors – Above Ground (Packing Crates for Pots)

I call this method the Adriano method, even though I'm sure other people have used it.

What's nice about this method is that you have the advantages of pot growing (restrained roots that can give higher-yielding trees), but don't have to schlepp the pots indoors or bury them.

Simply build rectangular wooden boxes—a bit like packing crates without tops or bottoms—and leave them permanently in your garden. Here's how:

- Lay 2"x12" boards (this is what Adriano uses) on edge and nail together;
- In the winter, lay the potted fig plants on their sides within the boxes. (You can pack in as many plants as will fit comfortably—see photo.);
- Put a sheet of plywood over the box as a lid, to provide strength so it doesn't collapse under the weight of snow;
- Add a layer or two of foam sheets for insulation; and
- Finish with a tarp, to keep out moisture.

Do I use this method? Not yet. My wife advised that she's not crazy about the look of wooden frames, so I first need to install some hedging! Or, I could make it more aesthetically pleasing by constructing the frames from rock, landscape timbers, or whatever looks appealing.



These trees are ready for winter. They'll be topped with Styrofoam, plywood, and a tarp.



The same trees in the spring, after they've been uncovered.

Outdoors – Above Ground (Quickie Greenhouse)

My late neighbour Santos had both a lemon and fig tree growing in the ground adjacent to his patio, over which he had an arbour.

With the arrival of winter weather, he would put clear plastic around the patio and his prized lemon and fig trees. Then he heated the space to keep it above freezing.





If you want an in-ground plant, but don't care to bury it, consider an A-frame. Remove large branches that are too thick to bend. Shown here are branches bent at the ground.




An A-frame seen from the other end, with the tips of the branches poking out.

Outdoors - Above Ground (A-Frame)

So at this point you might be saying, “I want to plant my fig in the ground—not a pot—but there’s no way I’m heating it and I’m not burying it.” Here’s the answer: an A-frame over a bushy fig. It’s easier than you think:

- 1.** Remove large branches that are too thick to bend, which will encourage the growth of young, flexible ones in the spring;
- 2.** Bend the tree over as far as possible. The goal is to have the remaining branches as near to the ground as possible, with nothing in between;
- 3.** Cover the plant with insulating material such as carpet, blankets, or foam; and
- 4.** Finish by rigging a wooden A-frame over the whole thing, to protect from wind and heavy snow.



In the background is an in-ground fig, with lots of pots in front. They're all against the south-facing wall of a brick house.

Outdoors – Above Ground (Regrow)

My neighbour Joe had a fig beside the foundation of his house. He didn't give it any special treatment. In the winter it died to the ground, but in the summer it would regrow. If you choose a suitable variety, you could use this approach and forego the breba crop, aiming only for the main crop.

I recently met a gardener who cuts his in-ground plants to about 30 cm (one foot) in height every fall, then covers them with a thick layer of mulch. He was pleased to report that in the second year he was already enjoying main-crop figs.

Hint

Don't despair: Cold-damaged fig plants often resprout from the ground. Just be patient (and don't overwater).

A Figatorium?

My long-term goal is a figatorium. The idea—and the word—came to me from Peter Vicano, an avid fig hobbyist who jokingly calls his greenhouse with a retractable roof a “figatorium.” His figatorium is mainly planted with in-ground trees, but he has a smattering in pots, too. See page 51 to read more about Peter.

The idea behind it is simple: Year-long greenhouse-growing isn't practical, nor is it ideal for fig trees. But greenhouse-like conditions in early spring (to give the trees a head start without risk of frost) and in the fall (when there is rarely enough heat to ripen all the main-crop figs) would boost productivity.

Don't confuse this greenhouse with a tropical paradise: In the winter, it's cool, so that the fig trees stay dormant.

Grow Figs

Where You Think You Can't

Winner, 2012 Silver Award
Garden Writers Association

In this fun, plain-language book, Canadian horticulturist Steven Biggs tells northern gardeners how to grow figs. It's a topic that fascinates gardeners and non-gardeners alike.

Tips, techniques, and anecdotes—along with the insights of other fig experts—make fig growing doable for gardeners in fig-unfriendly climates.

DID YOU KNOW that a fig tree overwintering indoors needs no more care than a potted houseplant? Actually, it needs less, because figs go dormant in the winter.

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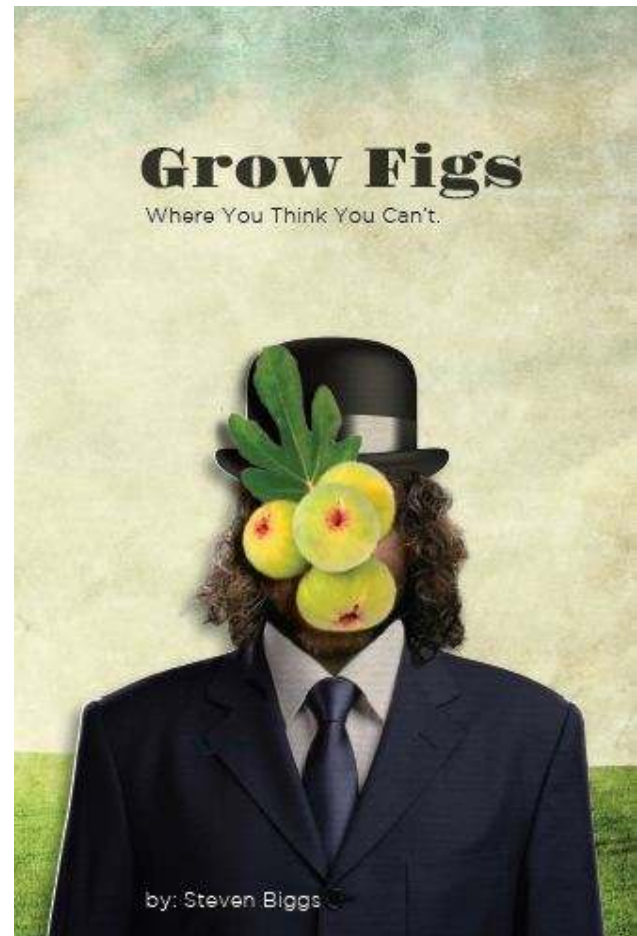
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