

more spreading tree, or waiting a year or two if you prefer a taller tree. At the desired time, remove the leader just above the topmost lateral. Remove any laterals that were shortened the previous winter. Remove any competing leaders as they form.

Pruning an established mulberry tree

Once a mulberry is established, there is little need for pruning apart from removing damaged or misplaced branches. It is worth paying attention to the balance of the tree. If it starts to lean to one side, it might be worth removing a large branch if this helps the situation. If you are not sure, ask a tree surgeon or fruit tree specialist for advice. Another solution, if the tree is leaning heavily as it ages, is to prop it with stout wooden props.

Harvesting mulberries

Although mulberries can be picked and eaten straight from the tree, the traditional way of harvesting is to place a white sheet under the tree, giving the tree a gentle shake to dislodge any fruit that are ripe. The sheet is then lifted and gathered together gently to collect the fruit. The fruit ripens over a long period in late summer to early autumn.

A word of warning – mulberries stain very easily and stick to shoes, so take care not to plant a tree overhanging the path to your house, or you may end up with carpets spotted with mulberry juice.

Using mulberries

Mulberries will not keep, so either eat them straight away or use them in the various preserves that enjoy their flavour. They can be used in much the same way as raspberries or blackberries in cooking, although they seem

to be better when not cooked too long. Mulberry ice cream, summer pudding and fool are examples of good uses. They are great for fruit salad, where their tart sweetness enlivens other fruits.

Mulberry gin is a traditional recipe for the alcoholically inclined. Mulberries can also be frozen, although they will lose some of their wonderful texture.

FIGS

Figs, like many of the less common fruits featured here, are also more at home in their Mediterranean homeland, but are still well worth growing in Britain. They are one of those fruits that is incomparably better when grown at home rather than bought in the shops. Savouring their delicious, juicy stickiness just before the wasps and hornets join in is one of those delights of summer that is barely matched.

The history of fig growing

The fig is thought to be one of the first plants cultivated by humankind. Excavations at Gilgal in the Jordan valley have revealed traces of fig cultivation dated between 9400 and 9200 BC. Figs are thought to originate from the area around Afghanistan and Iran, but they are now naturalised in much of the warm temperate and subtropical world.

Figs were well known during the height of Roman and Greek civilisations. The Greeks claimed that figs were gifted to them by the goddess Demeter. Cato mentions six different figs and Pliny twenty-nine. Archaeological remains have shown that figs were present in Britain in Roman times, although it is uncertain whether they were actually grown here.



Ripening figs. They will turn a purple-brown colour and hang down when ripe.

The first recorded planting of figs in Britain was by Cardinal Pole at Lambeth Palace in 1552. It is thought the variety might have been White Marseille, one still available today. Figs became a fruit that was enjoyed largely by the aristocracy; their cultivation has always been marginal here, so the large walls and greenhouses of stately homes were made best use of.

Cultivation of figs

Fig trees appreciate warm, sunny conditions, but can be grown easily in warm parts of the British Isles, even though their fruits develop and ripen over two seasons because of our cool climate. Even in cooler areas, figs might succeed if they are trained against a sunny wall. Providing a tree is well looked after, you can expect 50 to 100 figs a year, and far superior to any that you are likely to find in the shops.

Figs are grown on their own roots, not grafted on to rootstocks. They are largely untroubled by pests and diseases, apart from those pests that would like to eat the fruit

before you do. See Chapter 9 (page 160) for details.

Conditions

In order to appreciate the art of growing figs, it is worth looking at their native habitat in the heat of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern climate. They thrive on rocky hill-sides, where the drainage is sharp and the heat is reflected by the rocks and warm, bare soil. This is entirely the opposite of the comparatively cold, wet soils and climate of Britain. So, the more we can do to replicate the warm, rocky conditions of the fig's homeland, the better. A sunny and sheltered location is preferable, such as against a south-facing wall of the house. Figs fruit best where growth is restricted by a pot, raised bed or a planting pit (see right and Diagram 57 on page 294).

Fruiting well is not the same as growing well: fig trees will grow well if given a free root run and plenty of nitrogen, but they will not crop well. As with all fruit trees, there is a need to balance vegetative growth with fruit production. With fig trees, there is more of a need to restrict growth in order to encourage fruiting.

Growing figs in a container

Figs are well suited to growing in pots, apart from two potential problems. The first is that figs can become large, heavy trees that can easily blow over. Tying the tree to a stable object such as a vine eye in a wall will overcome this difficulty. The second potential problem is that figs will shed their crop if they become stressed by drought. Although they enjoy warm, dry conditions, figs in pots require a surprising amount of water. They will also need some feeding with a high-potash feed, such as tomato food or comfrey



A fig tree growing in a large container.

liquid, in order to do best. A foliar feed of seaweed will help to strengthen the tree and protect against fungal disease.

Figs can be started off in a 25-30cm (10-12") container, depending on their size when obtained. A soil-based compost such as John Innes No.3 is the ideal growing medium. Crocks or grit in the bottom of the pot will help to keep the drainage sharp. Lifting the pot just off the ground with pot feet or bricks will help to avoid waterlogging in winter. Alternatively, figs will enjoy a spell in the greenhouse over the winter months.

Figs can be potted on every one to two years, gradually increasing the size of pot. When re-potting, plant the fig 2-3cm (1") deeper

than it was before and remove around 20 per cent of the rootball by cutting it back with a sharp knife. Once re-potting becomes difficult, because the tree and pot become too large, the pot can be plunged into the soil in a suitable place. The retention of the pot will still restrict the roots.

Growing figs against a wall

A south-facing wall is an ideal location because figs will enjoy the warmth retained by the wall, the shelter from cold winds and the rain shadow created by the wall. The base of a wall is often an easy place to restrict root growth, either by using paving slabs or a raised border or concrete path. Fig fans can become vigorous plants, so a strong framework of wires will be needed to train them on. Fig fans can be contained in an area about 2.5m (8') high and 4.5m (14'6") wide.

In more northern areas of Britain, some kind of winter protection is preferable. This can be formed of fleece or more natural materials, such as straw or bracken contained by netting or chicken wire.

Creating a planting pit for figs

Sometimes, there will be no obvious place to plant a fig where the roots will be restricted, so the tree will need to be planted in the open; in this case you can restrict the roots by creating a planting pit. Dig a large square hole where the tree is to be planted. Place paving slabs (ideally 60x60cm [2x2']) around the sides of the hole, so that they protrude very slightly above the soil level; this prevents the roots from spreading on the soil surface. Place a thick layer of rubble, bricks, etc. in the bottom of the planting hole to improve the drainage and to hinder the formation of large tap roots (see Diagram 57 overleaf).

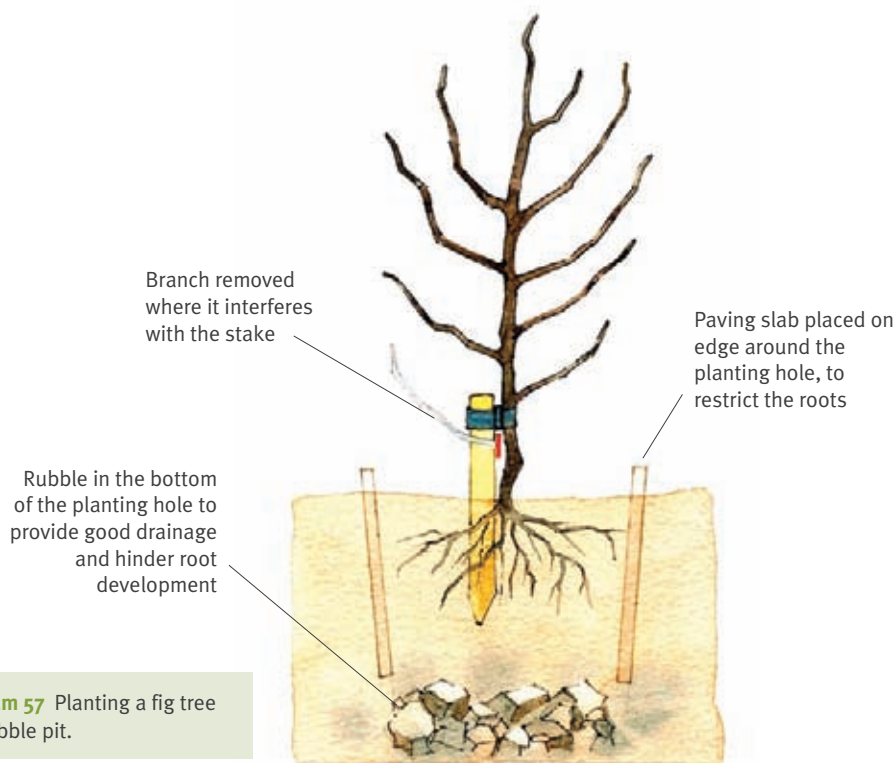


Diagram 57 Planting a fig tree in a rubble pit.

Some soils that are normally thought of as being difficult will actually suit figs well. Both chalk and heavy clay soils will restrict root development naturally. Although heavy clay soils can inhibit root development, the drainage is likely to be poor, so serious attention will need to be paid to improving this.

Watering might be necessary during drought conditions in the summer. Feeding should veer towards high-potash feeds rather than those high in nitrogen. Farmyard manure or compost applied as a mulch in spring can be supplemented with tomato feed in summer.

The fruiting cycle of figs

It is very easy to become confused by the fruiting cycle of figs, because they carry dif-

ferent generations of fruit on the tree all at the same time. In the British climate, once the ripe fruits have been picked, there will be two types of fruit left on the tree. The larger ones, from about marble size upwards, are fruits produced this season that will not ripen properly. The fruits that will ripen next year are now the size of a pea or even smaller. They can be seen mostly on the final 20-30cm (8-12") of shoots that have grown this year.

The larger fruits are likely to split or fall off during the winter. Removing all the fruits larger than a pea in November allows the tree to put its energy into developing the small fruits ready for next season. In other words, the fruits need to develop over two seasons in our climate. It is the fruits that



The same section of a fig tree before and after removing the larger fruits in November.






After removing the larger fruits, just the embryonic fruits remain, ready to grow and ripen the following year.

would normally develop and ripen over one season in a warmer climate that are removed in order to help the embryonic fruits develop for the following year.

Fig varieties

There are over 600 varieties of figs in cultivation, but only a small number are suitable for growing in our cool climate. There are many varieties suitable for growing in a large greenhouse (Reads Nursery – see Resources – lists a large selection), but just three varieties that are widely stocked for outdoor cultivation in Britain, listed in the chart overleaf. They are all self-fertile, so only one tree needs to be planted.

Recommended fig varieties	
Variety	Characteristics
BROWN TURKEY 	The most reliable variety. It has attractive foliage and bears heavy crops of dark-brown, good-quality sweet figs.
BRUNSWICK 	Carries moderate crops of large pear-shaped greenish figs that become tinged with brown in warm summers. They need a hot summer to ripen properly.
WHITE MARSEILLE 	Large green rounded fruits with sweet, translucent flesh, which ripen well outdoors in favoured locations.

Pruning fig trees

Fig trees are usually trained as a bush or as a fan, preferably against a south-facing wall, where they will benefit from the warmth and shelter. They are best planted in late winter or early spring, once the harshest of the winter weather has passed. Most pruning of figs is carried out in spring, with April being the normal time in southern Britain, but extending into May in the North. Be aware that the milky sap of figs can be an irritant to the skin.

Formative pruning of a fig bush

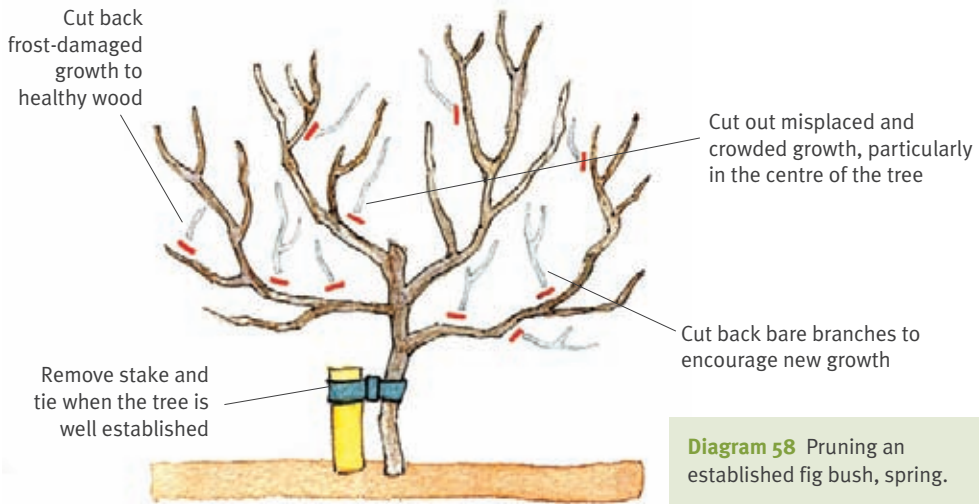
Formative pruning of a bush tree is the same as that for an apple bush (see Chapter 10, page 185), except for the time of pruning. Figs

benefit from being trained into an open shape, so that maximum amounts of sunlight can reach developing fruits, so ensure that the branch framework does not become too dense.

Pruning an established fig bush

Once the bush is established, spring pruning aims to keep the branch structure clear and open (see Diagram 58). Any crossing branches should be removed and areas of overcrowded growth thinned. Occasionally, older branches can be cut back to a young replacement shoot in order to encourage new growth. Any frost-damaged growth should be removed.

Figs are also pruned in the summer, with the aim of increasing light and helping to reduce



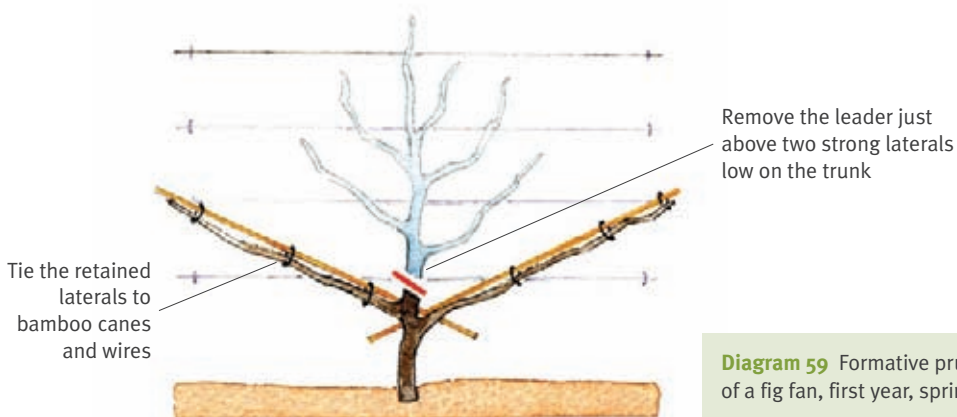
the crop of unwanted figs that will not ripen. This is done by pinching out all new growth to restrict it to five or six leaves per shoot. Because fig leaves are so large, it can be worth removing individual leaves that are casting a shadow on ripening fruits.

Fig trees that have been neglected can be restored by hard pruning. It is helpful to feed the tree whenever hard pruning is carried

out, because the pruning will encourage the tree to put on lots of new growth.

Formative pruning of a fig fan

Firstly, ensure that the wall is clothed with a structure of strong wires to hold the branches in place. Plant a two-year-old feathered tree at least 20cm (8") away from the wall. Cut back the leader to leave the lowest two laterals (see Diagram 59). These can be tied in



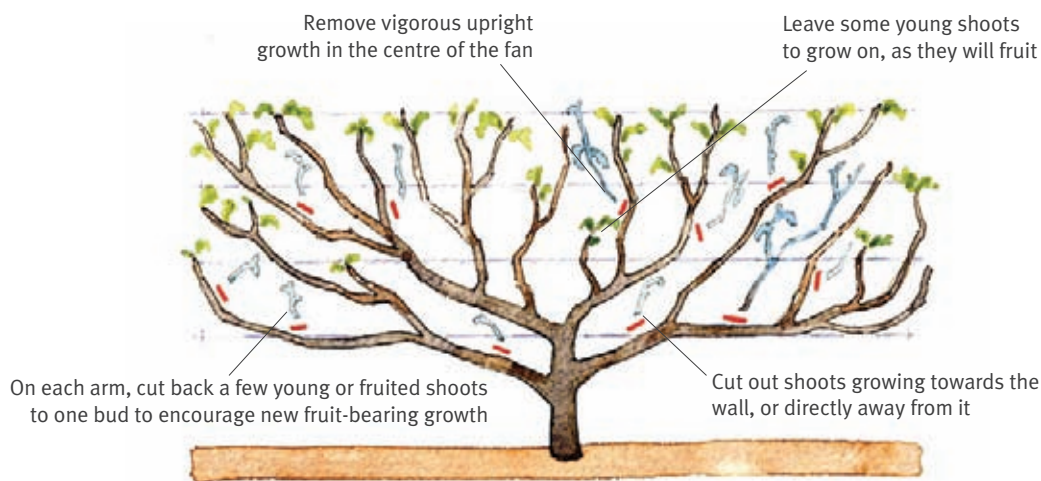


Diagram 60 Pruning an established fig fan, spring.

with bamboo canes at an angle of about 45 degrees to the ground. Shorten these two laterals by about half if weak, or less if growing strongly. If planting a maiden tree, allow it to grow on for a year, until strong laterals are in place. If two strong laterals are not apparent, the leader can be cut back hard in order to stimulate new growth that will produce two suitable branches for the following season.

After this, a fig fan is formed in the same way as a peach fan (see Chapter 14, page 266), except that the branches need to be further apart because of the large size of fig leaves.

Pruning an established fig fan

Once the space on the wall has been filled in, the aim of pruning is to keep an open branch structure and to encourage the growth of young shoots that will bear figs on their tips. Towards the ends of branches, cut back fruited shoots to one bud in order to encourage new growth. Some shoots will need to be left, because they are bearing the embryonic

fruits that will ripen in the coming season (see Diagram 60). Approximately one branch on either side of the fan can be removed each year, or cut back to young growth that will form a replacement. Any frost-damaged wood or vigorous upright growth can also be removed at this time, along with shoots growing towards or away from the wall.

Harvesting figs

As figs ripen, they turn from green towards dark brown or even purple, apart from the so-called green figs or white figs, such as White Marseille: these just turn a little more yellow. They also lose their semi-erect stance and begin to droop.

Once the figs have been picked, there is nothing better than eating them straight from the tree. Even if there are others waiting for them indoors, I consider it the right of the fig harvester to sample a few, to ensure that they are fit for others to eat!

Using figs

If sufficient numbers of them make it into the house, there is a whole range of uses to which figs can be put. To my mind, they are so wonderful that eating them for dessert, perhaps served with a dollop of clotted cream and some walnuts, is pleasure enough. Orange juice is a frequent accompaniment for figs, while blue cheese gives a more savoury flavour. Alcohol, such as brandy or port, is also a suitable companion.

As with most fruits, there is a range of jams, chutneys and other preserves that can be made from figs. Fig ice cream, fig and almond tart and figgy pudding are all delicious desserts. Figs can also be bottled, usually with some form of alcoholic syrup, or dried in a slow oven or drying box. Figs are best kept out of the fridge and freezer.

LESS COMMON FRUITS

All the major types of fruit grown in the British Isles have now been covered in this book; they tend to be popular for a reason, which is that they are either delicious or easy to grow, or in many cases both. There are also a number of other fruit trees that were commonly used in the past, but are now considered marginal. Despite their relative obscurity, these fruits are still worthy of consideration.

Elderberries

The elder (*Sambucus nigra*) is a well-known native tree of the English countryside. It carries flat-topped creamy-white blossoms in May that have turned to deep-purple berries by the end of the summer. Elder is a tree that has strong associations with the superstition and folklore of country people. In centuries

gone by it was used as a protection against witches and magic. It has been said that anyone cutting down an elder would be cursed with bad luck.

In addition to its folk significance, the elder has always been a useful plant, both for its wood and for its flowers and berries. The flowers have been used in herbal medicine as well as for making various drinks. Elderflower cordial and elderflower champagne, for example, are available commercially and also commonly made at home.

The berries are used to make a syrup that is said to strengthen the immune system and cure respiratory illnesses. This syrup also makes a delicious cordial or a healthy accompaniment to ice cream. The berries were also used medicinally in the past; the sixteenth-century English herbalist Gerard says that the berries “are good for such as have the dropsie, and such as are too fat, and would faine be leaner”. The Romans used the berries to dye their hair black. Elderberry wine and jam are other common uses for the fruit.



Elderberries can be used to make healthy cordials or syrup.



The Devon sorb apple, or otmast. The speckling is a normal feature of this fruit.

While elder is usually thought of as a hedgerow tree in England, it is also grown commercially for use in drinks and medicine. This commercial use has resulted in the development of a number of varieties of elder that have been bred to improve upon the yields of the native tree. There are cultivars from countries in Northern and Eastern Europe, such as Bradet or Samdal, which carry heavy crops of large berries. The American elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) bears flowers from July to October. It is not self-fertile, but fruits will follow, so long as pollination takes place. Johns and York are cultivars selected from this tree.

Rowan berries and chequers

There are various berries produced on different types of trees in the *Sorbus* genus. Rowan berries are one example, produced on the rowan or mountain ash tree (*Sorbus aucuparia*). One form of this tree is *Sorbus aucuparia* var. *edulis*, which was introduced

in the 1800s, bearing larger berries that are less bitter than the species (*S. aucuparia*). The whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*) and the service tree (*Sorbus domestica*) both carry edible fruits that were eaten by children before more pleasant ‘sweets’ became available.

Chequers also have their place in British history, as evidenced by the number of pubs called The Chequers. These small fruits of the wild service tree (*Sorbus torminalis*) were used for making an alcoholic drink a little like cider, which probably accounts for the number of pubs bearing their name.

Some of these *Sorbus* fruits are bletted, in the same way that medlars are (see page 288), to sweeten them and improve their texture. Rowan jelly has traditionally been served as an accompaniment to venison and game.

Rowans hybridise easily, producing regional variations. The Devon sorb apple (*Sorbus devoniensis*) is an example; it is a small tree