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Figs

By Cass Turnbull

Having Hildegard Hendrickson come give PlantAmnesty another talk was a real treat – her first talk last spring was on kiwis. At a Meeting of Like Minds one February, Hildegard discussed how to grow figs in the Northwest. I thought I would take a moment to write down the take-home messages before they slip out of the grasp of my recall.

Why Grow Figs?

Figs don't travel or store well when they are fresh, and they won't ripen after you pick them. These two facts make figs an extra special treat that you pretty much have to grow yourself, or know someone who does, to enjoy. What a sweet treat they are!

Why Doesn't My Fig Fruit?

The most common question about figs is "Why doesn't my fig bear fruit?" the answer is that *you have the wrong kind,* probably. Many kinds of figs from around the world need a specific pollinating wasp that we simply don't have in the Pacific Northwest. But, you may not get figs even if you have the right kind, *if you don't give your plant enough hot sun.* Even the ones that do well here need at least eight hours of full sun, probably against a wall on the south or west side of your house or other structure – with no overstory of Doug Firs! Figs don't need much water either. Use less water for sweeter fruit. Please note that figs do not need a cross-pollinator.

Nomenclature

There are no scientifically named varieties of fig, and, since they have been in cultivation for millennia, much crossbreeding and misnaming has occurred over the centuries. Literally hundreds of varieties of figs exist with very confusing nomenclature. Synonyms abound. Some varieties have six or more different names. To make things even more complicated, the same name is sometimes used for more than one variety. Even experts have difficulty distinguishing between some varieties. I believe this is why Hildegard spent time showing the leaves of different varieties and describing the various color combinations of skin and meat. When someone tells her their fig isn't producing, she tries to figure out the kind of fig in question by asking color and leaf-shape questions. The *take-home* message is that if your fig doesn't produce, dig it out and plant a new one, or, if you are adventurous, you can graft a scion from a good one onto the rootstock of your loser. If you are interested in grafting and want to learn more, contact the Seattle Tree Fruit Society at http://www.seattletreefruitsociety.com.

Good Varieties for the PNW

Hildegard recommends the following varieties for the Pacific Northwest: 'Gillette', 'Desert King', 'Lattarula', 'Neverella', 'Appalachian Brown Turkey', 'Petite Negri', and 'Brunswick' (also called 'Vashon Violet').

Pruning Figs

Figs produce their little baby fruits on the wood of last year's growth. This means that, if you whack your entire plant to the ground or hat-rack it

in spring, you won't get fruit this year (because you cut it all off). If you let it grow back, it will produce fruit the following year. Sometimes a hard freeze will kill the plant down to the roots. Fear not, it will grow back and produce fruit next year. If your hubby is whacking your fig every spring, that, too could be a reason for no fruit, ever.

This is not to say figs shouldn't be pruned. *Au contraire!* Figs are extremely tough – they don't rot from heading cuts, and they renew themselves with suckers. Hildegard says you can prune a fig *like a fruiting tree* with a single trunk or *as a shrub* with many canes originating from the base, but still getting pretty dang big.

Hildegard does her major pruning in the spring before the fig leafs out. If we get an arctic blast, the tender tips can be injured. This is also a good time to start new fig trees from cuttings.

## Pruning as a Small Fruiting Tree

Until recently, Hildegard liked to prune her fig *like a little fruiting tree* so she could tie the bird netting around the crown and gather it in at the trunk, thus foiling a host of backyard wildlife that wants to eat all her precious figs. She stresses that sharing with wildlife just doesn't work because crows will peck one bite out of each and every fruit. Hildegard has recently changed her mind about pruning figs as a small tree – she now plans to grow her future figs as bushes, especially since her 'Desert King' has decided to reach for the sky. The 'Lattarula' and the 'Neverella' can be more easily controlled.

Hildegard really didn't detail how she prunes her figs – when she does prune as a tree, I suspect that she uses a combination of crown reduction (drop-crotch) pruning to keep the tree shorter, and periodic removal of watersprouts from the scaffolds. She says she doesn't have a rigorous regimen for pruning. Because so many watersprouts grow from each place a cut is made, she prunes when she thinks pruning is needed and her pruners are in her pocket. She does recommend removing all the suckers that keep springing up near the base.

I have noticed that after a warm, wet spring or after a drop-crotch pruning, fig branches may sud-

denly splay down in a most unfortunate manner. Just so you know.

Option one —Prune fig as a fruit tree
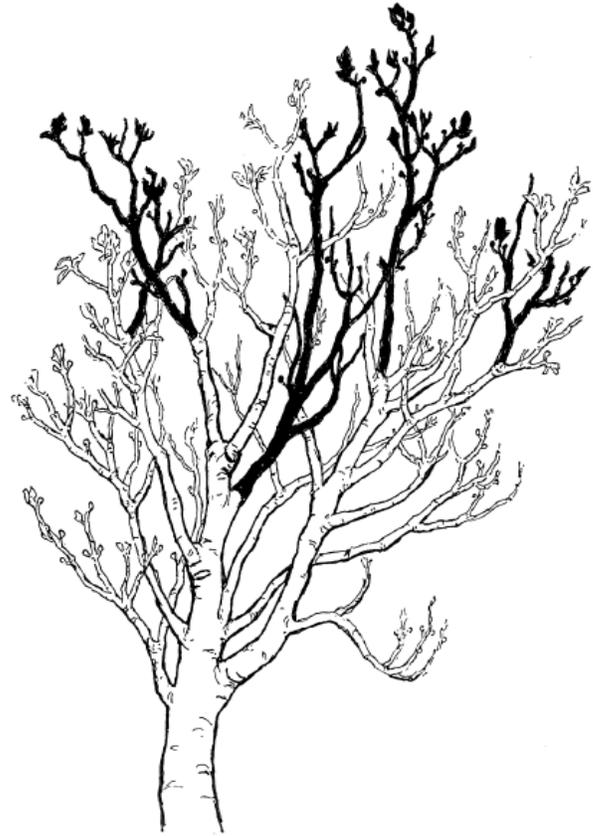
Branches shown in black are to be pruned

Pruning as a Cane-Growing Shrub

If you prune your fig like a cane-growing shrub, you will be using the *shotgun method* sometimes applied to hydrangeas. Every year, cut some canes to the ground, or an inch or six above. Even cuts as big as two inches in diameter and nonselective cuts are perfectly okay – after all, it's a fig. Then head (top) some of the canes to force them to branch. These nonselective heading cuts are often scary looking, but if you don't make such cuts, be aware that one cane (especially on the 'Desert King' variety) can grow straight up for way too long before it sets up fruit. Leave the existing shorter canes unpruned so they will bear fruit this coming year.

Hildegard says netting bush-pruned figs is just as important as with tree-pruned figs.

When I asked her what would happen if a fig tree was allowed to grow, she pointed out that the tree would get really, really big and the fruit would get smaller, less tasty, harder to pick because they are out of reach, and impossible to net.

Letting Her Rip

I suggest that if a fig is being used as a small ornamental tree, just let her rip – almost no pruning needed. Avoid all but the lightest of thinning since figs watersprout quite easily, and we don't want that! I think a fig would look its best and be lowest maintenance that way.

Pests and Diseases

We have no serious pests or diseases on figs here. Isn't that nice?

Storing Fruit

Hildegard recommends letting figs dry out halfway, in the open or in a fruit dryer (but only until the pieces are still slightly soft and very sticky). Then store layered on sheets of tinfoil in the freezer. If they are not stored in the freezer, the pieces are liable to mold.

Root Pruning and Transplanting

Figs are excellent candidates for root pruning and transplanting. In fact, the roots can be quite aggressive, invading other areas of the garden and sometimes spawning more fig bushes – bushes that you don't need or want. Root-prune mercilessly by jumping straight down on your shovel all around the fig's drip line. Too avoid this root problem, figs can be grown in containers, with proper pruning in the sunniest place in the yard or on a sunny balcony.
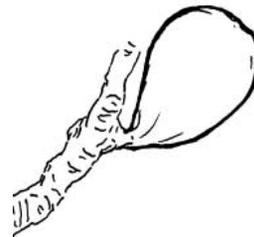
Fig Crops

In warm climates, figs produce continuously. We normally only get to eat the spring crop. The second (fall) crop rarely ripens here, because the weather is cold and dark. Hildegard does say, though, that her 'Appalachian Brown Turkey' sets only one crop – in the fall, and it ripens, though the figs are small. Otherwise, if you do happen to get a second crop, you can ignore it, which is to say, the figs do NOT need to be removed.

Harvesting Fruit

Generally speaking, figs won't ripen when picked from the tree in an unripened state. Wait until the perfect moment, when they are very, very ripe. This perfect moment is when the fig hangs or droops straight down, with a little drop of honey at its base. Hildegard strongly emphasizes that *figs should not be picked before they are completely ripe*.

Not yet

It starts like this

Pick the super duper drooper