

Fig Tree Winter Protection

by Phyllis D.

Rutgers Master Gardener of Hunterdon County



Many gardeners grow figs successfully in New Jersey. Fig trees (*Ficus carica*) are evergreen plants in warm climates but require winter protection in New Jersey. Unprotected fig plants, excluding root systems, are often injured by sustained temperatures below 20°F. When this occurs, new shoots will sprout from the roots but are rarely capable of producing mature fruits that same season. If winter injury to the main stems is minimal to moderate, the plant will produce a modest crop the following summer. If injury is severe, the plant may require two growing seasons to return to normal production.

Fig trees are also damaged by early frosts when the temperature reaches 25°-27° F. At these temperatures the tree will drop its leaves and will need to be protected for the dormant seasons low temperatures. Over the winter the fig tree needs protection until the temperature is moderate, and the danger of spring frost has passed.

Here's a breakdown of common winter protection methods for figs:

1. Growing in Containers & Moving Indoors:

- Method: Planting figs in large pots (minimum 15 gallons) that can be moved indoors during the winter to a protected, cool environment like a garage or greenhouse.

- Benefits: Protects both the plant and the roots from freezing temperatures.
- Considerations: Requires manageable pot size and a suitable indoor storage space.
- Tip: Use wheeled casters on containers for easier movement.

2. Wrapping & Insulating:

- Method: Wrapping the tree trunk and branches with insulating materials like burlap or tar paper.
- Steps:
 1. Prune the tree to a manageable size and remove any leaves or remaining fruit.
 2. Tie branches together to reduce the overall size.
 3. Wrap with burlap, then heavy brown paper, and finally tar paper.
 4. Mound soil around the base for added insulation.
- Benefits: Provides protection against cold and drying winds.
- Considerations: Requires labor and materials.
- Caution: Avoid using plastic for wrapping, as it can trap moisture and cause problems.



3. Burying or Trenching:

- Method: Bending pliable fig branches down to the ground and burying them in a trench or covering them with soil, leaves, or compost.
- Benefits: Offers good insulation, especially for smaller or more flexible plants.
- Considerations: Can be labor-intensive, may not be practical for larger trees.

4. Building a Protective Cage & Filling with Insulation:

- Method: Creating a cage around the fig tree using chicken wire or other fencing and filling it with insulating material like hay, leaves, or straw.
- Benefits: Provides insulation and protection from wind.
- Considerations: Requires materials and construction.
- Tip: Cover the top with a tarp to shed rain and snow.

5. Planting in Protected Locations:

- Method: Selecting a planting site that offers some natural protection from harsh winter conditions, such as the south side of a building or in a sheltered area.
- Benefits: Reduced exposure to cold winds and sunscald, potentially minimizing winter damage.
- Considerations: Requires careful site selection and may not be sufficient in very cold climates.

Important Notes:

- Variety Selection: Choosing cold-hardy fig varieties like 'Brown Turkey', 'Celeste', or 'Hardy Chicago' can significantly improve winter survival, even with minimal protection.
- Timing: Apply winter protection after the leaves have fallen and the plant is dormant, typically around Thanksgiving in many areas.
- Removal: Remove winter protection in the spring after the danger of frost has passed.
- Pruning: Prune figs in late winter or early spring to remove dead or damaged branches and encourage new growth.



References:

- “Fig Cultures in Northern Climates”- Cornell University Cooperative Extension, Nassau Co. New York, B-1-1 MTC
- “ Growing Figs in Maryland”- University of Maryland Extension, Author: Jon Traunfeld, Extension Specialist
- Aug.14 2024
- “Figs in the Home Garden”- Rutgers NJAES Fact Sheet FS1198

