

Chronicle Telegram
For 15 September, 2019
Winter Care for Figs and Other Tender Plants

As the nights grow colder, don't wait too long to bring your tender houseplants back indoors. The key for successful overwintering indoors is to NOT grow the plant. Unless you have a greenhouse or sunroom, it is unlikely you can provide the light and heat needed to keep growing tropical plants happy throughout winter. However, you can easily maintain a plant in a healthy condition by limiting its potential for growth.

Begin by withholding fertilizer from the plant—don't supply any granular or slow release fertilizer and use only plain water for irrigation. You don't want any fresh green growth as you move the plant into storage. Start to cut back on watering as well. Only give the plant enough water to keep the soil from drying out and the leaves looking hydrated.

As nighttime temperatures continue to drop move the plants out of their summer location to a sheltered porch or deck. Pull any weeds, remove fallen leaves and trim back if needed. Check for pests and remove them by hand or use a pesticide labeled for indoor plants. A good goal is to have all of your houseplants in a sheltered area before night temperatures fall below 40 degrees. That may sound cold, but most tropical plants can handle a few hours near 40 degrees without any damage.

When you move the plants inside you have a couple of options. First, you can place the plants in the sunniest locations, giving them only enough water to keep them healthy, perhaps even continuing to grow very slowly if in a bright location. This is not as easy as it sounds and you may experience significant leaf drop or weak yellow growth until you figure out the needs of the plant.

Another option is to store the plant totally dormant under low light, cool, dry conditions. This is not for every plant—you will have to use trial and error for some. Cacti do well in very dry, dim storage. They dehydrate and even shrink between waterings. Cane-type begonias (which may lose their leaves), large bay trees, succulents and many others do well dim and dry. However, watch the soil moisture carefully—the roots must remain hydrated without providing water for growth. It's a difficult balance, but it can be done, especially if the storage temperatures are low.

An unheated garage works well for larger plants. They can be moved into an attached garage and remain there until temperatures in the garage drop below freezing. Most years, garage storage works well into December, when the plants must be moved to basement storage, usually until March.

Fresh Figs in Ohio

Figs are an interesting exception. These sub-tropical fruits that can be grown outside or in pots. They bear a crop every year if well cared for. And if you have ever eaten a tree-ripened fig you will do whatever you need to guarantee a crop every year. If potted, they can be stored in a dark garage, sunporch or cool room—follow the general directions above. However, figs can also be grown outside in the ground. Hardy varieties such as Brown Turkey, Chicago, and Olympian

survive our winters and will come back from the roots every spring. Choose a sheltered, warmer area of the landscape. If the branches don't make it through winter, new ones will grow, reaching 5 to 6 feet tall; they will usually give you a small crop that ripens very late in the season.

To get a larger and earlier crop, growers will cover their figs with leaves, burlap, foam insulation—anything that will protect the branches. An older technique was to loosen the root ball and tip the entire plant over and bury it for winter.

Hearthstone Berry Farm, a small pick-your-own farm in Nova, received a grant to study the possibility of raising figs in unheated high tunnels. They were awarded a grant to study figs as a niche crop. USDA SARE gives educational and outreach grants to farmers and ranchers to study a host of topics including sustainability, crops, production efficiency, pollinators and more. Each grant has an outreach and education component.

The field day at Hearthstone Berry Farm will run from 11:00 to 12:30 on Saturday September 21 and is the first field day for this two-year fig project. The program and tour will look at the fig research and discuss the problems and potentials going forward. We will also look at a prior SARE-funded elderberry trial and discuss how that has been used to educate growers. Finally we can look at several blackberry varieties that the farm is growing to increase the harvest season and answer questions about the SARE grant process. Please RSVP to info@hearthstonefarm.net so we can have adequate handouts and refreshments for the tour.

Images:

[fig shrub.jpg]

Even if frozen to the ground a fig will grow new branches, usually reaching five or six feet tall by the end of summer. They add a lush, tropical look to any landscape. A fig grows just above every leaf, but not all of them will ripen before frost.