

## Greenhouse-Grown Figs

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I have been attempting to grow figs commercially ever since an old farmer took me to the south side of his storage barn and pulled a fully ripe Brown Turkish Fig off his large bush and proudly said, “eat this and you’ll be half way to becoming real Italian gourmet”. I had never eaten a fig before and, with the first bite, I was hooked! His technique was to get a hardy Brown Turkish Fig variety and plant them on the south side of his barn, which had a deep cement foundation. During the fig trees’ first five growing seasons, he would cut the right hand side roots back to the root ball. This would allow him to train the tree to easily hinge on its left hand roots and lean over each winter to go dormant lying on its side covered in leaves and a large heavy canvas tarp. He also put a ton of “D-Con” amongst the leaves to keep the vole/mouse population down. Each spring he would right the tree, give it some well-rotted cow manure and a sprinkle of potassium and walk away till September. At which time he would convert everyone he knew to Italian gastronomical theology.

Our attempt at replicating this concept was to grow Brown Turkish Figs in large 10-gallon containers in our greenhouses. This worked O.K. until I had collected 30 of them and my wife said, after ten years of dragging them in and out, it was me or the figs to the compost pile.

Undaunted, I found a well-drained area in our fields and tried planting them in the ground. They did great during the summer, but in the fall I had to figure out what to do with the overwintering challenge. I knew I did not want to start cutting roots and leaning them over, because I was missing one of my mentor’s key ingredients, his cement foundation that absorbed heat from the sun everyday and translated it down the wall to the roots. For two years we tried Johnny’s tall electrical conduit hoops and double and even triple covering them with multiple layers of remay and plastic. But each year the plants would have all their above ground branches buried back and they would have to start from ground up making a new scaffolding of branches; and of course, gave us no figs! Fast forward: Two years ago we had an old 14’ wide by 150’ mini greenhouse we no longer needed. We took it apart to cover our fledging fig field operation. We replaced the old ground pipes with much taller ones and, in doing so, jacked the greenhouse up so the new peak was 14’ tall and not 8’. (By the way this isn’t tall enough. I should have gone taller to 16’.) I have repeatedly been warned by Ed Pearson of Ledgewood Greenhouses to never jack up his houses beyond their design, but I have found the 14’ houses shed snow so well that I thought it would work. The problem will be getting the snow away from the sidewalls, if there is a substantial snow.

We fitted the sides with high rollup sides to keep it cool during the summers. One of the most important custom additions was adding a 16” by 4’ wide hinge~able window above each 4’ door at both ends of the greenhouse. One of the challenges of growing figs trees is keeping them dormant during the depth of winter. If it is a sunny day we need to keep the greenhouse from

heating up too much (or waking up the trees). So we have these little windows to allow the heat to escape. Only on the coldest nights do we close the windows. Our first year with the 14' foot greenhouse gave us tremendous growth and wonderful figs. But preparing our figs for winter, we knew we had to cut them back and wrap them some how. We hacked them back 80%, wrapped them with shredded (on the way to the dump) old remay and took old one-ton fertilizer bags and covered each tree. This worked great but for the fact it gave every mouse and vole in town a place to over winter and chew on all our branches!

The next year we strung a 3/16th wire cable from the top of the door at each end and pulled a piece of heavy remay over the entire run of trees. We still were worried so we found a heavy perennial ground cloth from Griffins Greenhouse supply that seems more like a dense shammy cloth. It is only 15' wide but it worked perfectly to fit over the line of pruned trees like a pup tent. The operative detail is to create an area that is insulated and that allows the ambient ground heat to radiate upwards from the bare ground to the branches to keep them above a deep freeze. We had a thermometer two feet off the ground last year and it never got below 28 degrees even when it was 16 degrees outside.

In spring, we dust the ground with compost and some Krehers' 4,3,3 composted chicken fertilizer. Next year we will put down some straw. Weeds have been a problem. Caution! If you do spring or summer pruning be careful not to let the milky juice from your cuts get on your skin, eyes, etc....it is quite caustic!

We had no visible bug problems until this fall when we suddenly had fruit rotting just as it was time to pick! About the same time we saw tiny white milky juice coming out all over the ripening figs. It was SWD! How stupid did we feel! Next year we will be more vigilant about monitoring their arrival and making sure any bad fruit is removed.

Our plants are centered in the 14' house and the distance, "in row", between the plants is 8'6". In year three of getting them to over winter, we are thinking 10' "in row" might be a little better. Also, this next season we will be removing the greenhouse cover early July to let the trees have better light and less heat build up during the dog days of summer. Watering is huge during the summer and to keep them happy we put four drip lines over the 14' width. I suspect we have two spotted spider mite problems, so I may be spraying a type of dormant oil on the trees at some early juncture next season. Another source of income is taking cuttings of the fall-pruned branches! Farmers market patrons all love a story about how to grow figs in their back yard. The one-gallon cuttings bring a easy \$10 a plant!

This season we were averaging about 4.5 lbs. per plant and getting \$13.00 a pound. We think with some early summer pruning we could get up to 7 lbs. a plant. Frankly, we are too busy with everything else to fine-tune it too much.... Like raising ginger, you do it for the visibility and presence at your markets more than for the dollars they represent. But at this point, I have eaten so many I can almost understand the Sicilian dialect and now know how to cook Cardoon!