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## **KINGMAN IS GROWING! Column**

### **Fruiting fig well suited to desert landscapes**

**By *Laura Murphy***, Mohave County Master Gardener

The fruiting fig (*Ficus carica*) is an excellent fruit and ornamental tree for desert landscapes. That's because many of the common figs, including the ones we grow here in Tucson are native to hot, dry regions of the Mediterranean.

Fig trees have attractive large, deeply-lobed leaves that are somewhat tropical in appearance, although trees are hardy to around 15 degrees. The rounded canopy of foliage is supported by attractive thick, gray-barked, spreading branches. Fig trees can grow to a height of 20 feet with equal or greater spread, but can be kept pruned to under 10 feet. Fig trees are deciduous, dropping their leaves in late fall and leafing out again in early spring. Fruits are dark brown to purple and pear-shaped.

Fruits can be eaten fresh off the tree, dried, or processed. In California figs are commercially produced and processed into paste for use in such products as fig bars or are dried and packaged for direct consumption.

Typically, two crops of figs are produced per season. The first crop develops in the spring and ripens in June. The second appears in late summer and may continue into the fall. But don't look for flowers on your fig tree! Unlike other tree fruits, fig trees have no blossoms on their branches. The flowers actually develop inside the fruit. These many tiny flowers produce the crunchy little seeds which give figs their unique texture.

The varieties most successfully grown here in the Arizona low desert are the 'Brown Turkey' and 'Black Mission' fig. Both are common fig varieties that do not require pollination to produce mature fruit.

Brown Turkey produces medium-sized, flavorful fruit with mahogany brown to purple skin. The fruit is best eaten fresh and is not good for canning or drying. For best fruiting, Brown Turkey requires heavy annual pruning to encourage maximum fruit production. Prune in the winter when the tree is dormant and it is easy to see the overall form.

Black Mission produces larger, purplish-black fruit with excellent flavor that can be eaten fresh, dried or canned. Only light pruning is generally recommended to provide a uniform shape and encourage good fruit production. Heavier pruning may be done to control size.

Pruning should include the cutting back of long branches to the desired length. Inward growing branches, water sprouts and crossing branches should also be removed. Keeping the center of the tree open to allow light penetration will encourage better fruiting. However, do not prune heavily in late spring or summer. Pruning then will expose the bark to strong sunlight and result in sunburn injury to the trunk and main branches.

Because of their pliable branches, fig trees are easily trained as 'espaliers'. In this method, the tree is planted against the wall and branches are trained to grow fanned out in a flat pattern against the surface. Branches growing out, rather than against the wall are kept pruned off. Brown Turkey is especially suited for espalier culture. East or south facing walls or fences are preferred for planting. Trees planted along west facing walls receive too much sun and heat to grow well. North facing walls do not provide the amount of sunlight necessary for fruiting.

Fig trees require good drainage and regular irrigation. During normal summer conditions, fig trees will need to be watered every 3 to 5 days. During extremely hot and dry conditions, watering may need to be increased. In the winter months, watering once every two weeks should suffice. If a tree is not getting enough water, the leaves will turn yellow and drop off. But

natural yellowing and leaf drop will also occur when the tree is going winter dormant, usually in December.

Fertilization is generally not required, unless new growth is less than one foot. When needed, apply two pounds of ammonium sulfate or similar fertilizer per tree in February and again in late September.

Finally, as with any fruit tree, keep in mind that figs can be messy. Dropping fruit attracts bees and other insects and can stain walks and patios, so choose a planting location carefully.

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