

Fig - Ficus sp.

General information: This is a huge tree growing to 60 feet tall and 60 to 70 feet wide. The dense, rounded canopy and gracefully drooping branches of Weeping Fig made it quite popular as a landscape tree until recently. The thick, shiny, two to five-inch-long, evergreen leaves generously clothe the long branches, and the tiny figs eventually turn a deep red. Branches will weep toward the ground forming a canopy so dense that nothing grows beneath it.

There are over 600 species of Ficus, most of them tropical and evergreen, although some, most notably *F. carica*, the common fig, are deciduous. Ficus produces a unique "fruit" which is actually an inverted flower. Not all Ficus produce edible fruit.

Ficus is one of the most loved bonsai for many reasons. It is an excellent tree for beginners, as most species of Ficus are fast growers, tolerant of most any soil and light conditions, make fine indoor bonsai, and perhaps most importantly, are remarkably forgiving of those just learning bonsai watering techniques. Most Ficus grow "banyan" roots naturally; this feature is often showcased by styling Ficus in dramatic air-root and root-over-rock styles.

At the end of this presentation are various Addendum for specific varieties of Ficus.

Family: Moraceae

Lighting: Most Ficus will grow decently in low light, but thrive in high light conditions.

Temperature: Hardy in zones 10B through 11. With the exception of *F. carica*, most Ficus are tropical, and require temperatures above 55F. An excellent choice for an indoor bonsai. Indoor Ficus appreciate being brought outdoors during summer. Does not like draughts.

Watering: Moderate, increasing in summer and decreasing in winter. Many Ficus are very tolerant of being over or under watered, which makes them ideal for beginners. Ficus likes a daily misting to maintain humidity.

Feeding: Every two weeks during growth, every 4-6 in winter, using a half-strength plant food or a bonsai fertilizer.

Pruning and wiring: Ficus are suitable for most styles of bonsai, but are especially suitable for styles which make use of their property of extensive rooting, such as air-root and root-over-rock styles. Ficus can be used for all sizes of bonsai, although, obviously, the small-leaved species make the best miniature bonsai. Leaf pruning can be used to reduce leaf size. Ficus can be wired, but become quite stiff when lignified, and thus are best wired while the shoots are a bit green. Watch carefully to see that the wire doesn't bite in, as Ficus is a very fast grower. Prune back to 2-4 leaves after 6-10 leaves have grown. Ficus will bleed a milky latex profusely. Many books recommend use of cut paste or other sealant for this reason. I've tried it, and found it to be more trouble than it's worth, since the oozing latex makes it difficult for the cut paste to adhere. In any case, when the latex dries, it forms its own natural seal. Gustafson recommends using a dull pruning tool on Ficus, as a clean cut made by a sharp tool tends to bleed more than a ragged-edged cut.

Propagation: One of the easiest plant to root from cuttings; although the specifics for maximum success vary with species, it's always worth sticking them into soil for the heck of it, unless you're already overrun with baby Ficus! My success rate, doing nothing special except an initial dose of Superthrive, is at least 80%. Very large diameter cuttings of Ficus can be successfully rooted. Air-layering is also quite easy. Ficus can be grown from seed, but require heat and humidity, and easily succumb to mold. I recommend growing from seed only if you desire a rare Ficus that can't be purchased easily.

Repotting: Every 2-3 years, although some will grow rapidly enough that yearly repotting may be necessary. Ficus is the single most forgiving bonsai in terms of repotting season. The best time is before a new growth spurt, especially in spring, but Ficus can literally be repotted any time of year if reasonable after-care is given. Roots can easily be pruned by half. Basic bonsai soil is recommended, although Ficus tolerates many soil conditions.

Pests and diseases: Pests: Scale, eelworm, black fly, thrips. Diseases: Anthracnose fungus and various forms of rot. Some ficus will lose leaves if overwatered or given too little light (see addenda for individual Ficus care).

Some species suitable for bonsai:

Ficus altissima: lofty fig

Ficus aurea: Florida fig

Ficus benjamina: weeping fig, Benjamin tree - One of the best trees for beginners - inexpensive, readily available, able to be transplanted any time of year, grows in low light, tolerant of erratic watering, develops spectacular banyan roots - what's not to love? Its large leaves, for one, but it can be leaf pruned, and dwarf cultivars, such as 'Too Little' can be had, albeit not as easily or cheaply. It has smooth grey bark, slightly drooping branches and bright green ovate leaves.

Ficus benjamina exotica

Ficus benjamina 'Lucy'

Ficus benjamina 'Natasha'

Ficus benjamina 'Too Little'

Ficus buxifolia - Small, triangular leaves and very good branch ramification for Ficus. Its small green fruit rarely ripens in temperate climates.

Ficus carica: common fig, fig tree - produces edible figs, but has very large leaves, making it suitable for only the largest sized bonsai. A Mediterranean tree, it is one of the few deciduous Ficus species.

Ficus deltoidea (also called F. diversifolia): mistletoe fig - small, leathery leaves, green or yellow fruit. A lovely houseplant, but reputedly tough to train for bonsai due to lack of trunk thickening and back budding.

Ficus erecta: inu-biwa - Its most noticeable feature is that it will produce figs. Roots easily from cuttings.

Ficus ilicina: laurel fig - An extremely fast grower, even for Ficus! Large leaves (which will reduce somewhat) make it best for large sizes.

Ficus macrophylla: Moreton Bay fig, Australian banyan - glossy, leathery, dark-green leaves.

Ficus microcarpa: banyan, Green Island fig - thick, round, half-dollar sized leaves, which can be reduced.

Ficus natalensis: Natal fig tree - long, leathery, spatula shaped leaves. Will grow air-roots.

Ficus neriifolia: fig, willow-leaf ficus

Ficus neriifolia regularis (also known as F. salicifolia): willow-leaf fig

Ficus panda - requires little light, only about 800 Lux.

Ficus platypoda: Australian fig - grows multiple trunks in nature. Will produce small orange-red flowers.

Ficus philippinensis - similar to benjamina, but has smaller leaves and bears pink fruit.

Ficus pumila: creeping fig - oval to heart shaped leaves. A climbing plant, easily trained into root-over-rock style.

Ficus religiosa: Bo tree, peepful fig - a sacred tree in Eastern traditions, the Bo tree has lovely heart-shaped leaves which are pink when young.

Ficus retusa: fig, banyan fig, Indian laurel - small, glossy, leathery leaves. Grows especially spectacular banyan roots.

Ficus retusa formosanum - daintier than F. retusa, with rounder and thicker leaves.

Ficus rubiginosa: Port Jackson fig, rusty leaved fig - gets its name from the rust-covered down which often coats the undersides of leaves. Needs only about 1000 Lux.

Ficus sagittata variegata: trailing fig - a graceful plant with lovely cream and green leaves, but does not form a thick trunk easily. Will naturally cascade or climb rocks.

Ficus salicifolia (also known as *F. neriifolia regularis*): willow-leaf fig

Ficus virens: spotted fig

Addendum for *Ficus benjamina*: weeping fig, Benjamin tree and its cultivars and varieties

A very easy plant to cultivate. Needs only 1000 Lux, although it adapts to both higher and lower light levels. Loves "warm feet" and thus can even be kept on a shelf above a radiator, although this is not necessary. May lose leaves if there is too much water or not enough light, but it tends to be very tolerant of adverse conditions. Can be leaf pruned during the main growing season to reduce leaf size. Wiring is possible at any time, but check frequently to make sure the wire isn't biting in. Will develop air-roots readily; I have found that a monthly dose of Superthrive can be given safely and will result in the profuse growth of air-roots. Cuttings are best taken in summer, but will actually root most any time.

Addendum for *Ficus buxifolia*

Can be kept indoors year round, although it prefers to be taken outside in summer. Likes a winter temperature of 64-75F. Needs much light (2000 Lux is ideal, although it will do with less). Will lose leaves if overwatered. It is usually best to prune after a new branch has developed 10-12 leaves. For main branches the technique is different: *F. buxifolia* develops very thin branches and it may be necessary to allow 30-40 leaves to grow before a main branch is pruned to its proper length to encourage thickening. Cuttings are best taken in summer.

Addendum for *Ficus carica*

Needs about 1500 Lux. Can be grown successfully indoors, but requires temperatures of 41-46F in winter to induce dormancy. Allowing the leaves to droop slightly before watering aids in leaf reduction. May go 2-4 years between transplantings. Forms very thick branches which are best wired when young. The best time for wiring is in early spring, before new growth begins. Leaf pruning to reduce leaf size is recommended. The plant will also dwarf leaves naturally after some years in a container. Take cuttings in spring, before they become lignified.

Addendum for *Ficus ilicina*: laurel fig

Can be treated much the same as *F. benjamina*. A monthly dose of Superthrive can be safely given, and will encourage the formation of banyan roots.

Addendum for *Ficus microcarpa*: banyan, Green Island fig

A very robust tree that does well both indoors and out. Can tolerate low light, but grows more strongly with high light. Grows extensive banyan roots, and will probably need to be transplanted every two years. Leaf pruning is used to reduce leaf size; a total defoliation can be performed at the end of spring on healthy specimens. Wait until the branches have lignified slightly to wire. Summer is the best time to take cuttings.

Addendum for *Ficus natalensis*: Natal fig tree

A very low maintenance tree: tolerates low light (1000 Lux), dry soil, and even being placed in a hot, dry spot, for example, near a radiator. Temperature should be between 59-75F, and near the cooler end in winter. Can take vigorous root pruning, and will probably require transplanting after 2 years. Cut back shoots after 12 leaves have developed. Can be wired from mid-late summer, but wait until branches are lignified. Cuttings are best taken in summer, and root more successfully when bottom heat is applied.

Addendum for *Ficus neriifolia* (*salicifolia*): Click on: Narrow leaf fig

Addendum for *Ficus religiosa*: Bo tree , peepful fig and *Ficus virens*: spotted fig

Needs much more light (2000 Lux) than the average *Ficus*. Prefers to be outside when temperatures are above 60F, but needs protection from wind. The tree will lose leaves if it is too cold or has too little light. Wiring is best done from autumn to spring on lignified branches. Will form a thick, spreading nebari - spreading the roots radially when transplanting will encourage this. Leaf pruning may be used to encourage reduction in size. A vigorously growing plant can be defoliated twice a year. Cuttings are best taken in early spring, with bottom heat between 71-79F.

Addendum for *Ficus retusa*: fig, banyan fig, Indian laurel

Much more sensitive during repotting than the average *Ficus*. Root pruning should be gradual in temperate climates. Do not attempt to wire or prune extensively for three months after transplanting. Sudden changes of temperature may cause all the leaves to drop.

Addendum for *Ficus sagitata variegata*: trailing fig

Does not have the thick, rubbery leaves of most *Ficus* species, which make it more sensitive to underwatering. Do not give this plant Superthrive, as it results in odd distortions of leaf shape. Wiring may cause enough stress to result in leaf loss, so attempt shaping gradually.

Bibliography:

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