

There are over 800 species of *Ficus* (Latin for "fig"). Most of them are native to warmer parts of the world; many make excellent houseplants. They are prized for their evergreen, often glossy foliage. A *Ficus* can be found for almost any indoor situation. Some are climbers, some shrubs and some are trees that will grow into spectacular specimen plants.

Proper Care

Light: Most of these plants do well either in bright indirect light or in a position where they get some sun each day. *F. pumila* however, likes more shade than other types. *Ficus* varieties that have plain green foliage tolerate greater amounts of shade than do those with variegated foliage which must have bright light with a few hours a day of direct sunlight. Otherwise, the variegated leaves are unlikely to retain their coloring and sharp contrasts.

Watering: *F. pumila* must never be allowed to become dry at the roots or its paper-thin leaves will shrivel and fall off. Water plants of this species moderately, giving enough to make the potting mixture thoroughly moist at each watering, and allowing only the top ½ inch of the mixture to dry out before watering again. Most other species require much less water; let the top half of the potting mixture dry before watering again. Over or under watering will cause the lower leaves to drop. Usually, green leaf drop indicates too much water while yellow leaves dropping indicate not enough water.

Temperature: Though most *Ficus* do best in normal room temperatures, they can be gradually acclimatized to a wide range of temperatures. *F. pumila*, the one species that flourishes in cooler conditions, is almost capable of withstanding frost. In very hot rooms a careful watch should be kept for red spider mites, which thrive in dry heat.

Feeding: Give standard liquid houseplant fertilizer once a month from March through October.

Repotting: When repotting becomes clearly necessary, as indicated by the appearance of roots coming through the drainage hole and/or a network of fine roots on the surface, move plants into pots one size larger. Repotting is best done in spring while the plant is actively growing.

Special Tips: All shiny-leaved *Ficus* should have their leaves cleaned regularly to free them of accumulated dust. Do this gently, especially when dealing with sensitive new leaves which are easily damaged. Prune back ⅓ to ¼ of the total foliage to keep your plant from outgrowing its space and to encourage new growth farther back on the branches.

Recommended Varieties

F. benjamina – (Weeping Fig) is a graceful tree, reaching more than 6' in height; its weeping habit becomes more pronounced as it gets older. The leaves are 2-4" long, apple green when young, darkening with age. The short, twig-like branches have a stringy bark which peels off. This bark can provide a home for scale insects, the weeping fig's most troublesome pest. A sticky substance, (called honeydew) on the leaves and stems is a good indication that insects are present. This plant does not have much of a dormant period; however, towards the end of winter a number of leaves normally yellow and fall, to be replaced by new growth.

F. elastica – (Rubber Plant) is one of the best known indoor *Ficus*. It has large, shiny, leathery foliage with prominent mid-ribs and a central stem that tends to grow unbranched unless pruned. New leaves emerge from a bright red protective sheath which drops off after the leaf unfurls. The rubber tree has many cultivars with differing leaf colors and patterns; however, all forms of this plant require at least a few hours of direct sun each day to maintain healthy compact growth.

F. lyrata – (Fiddle-leaf Fig) is so called due to its violin-shaped, puckered leaves. These leaves are a glossy medium green and have wavy margins; they can be up to 15" long and 9" wide. This plant is fast-growing and, like *F. elastica*, tends to keep a single stem unless the main growth point is pruned back to induce branching.

F. maclellandii 'Alii' – (Banana-leaf Fig) also has a treelike form; its leaves are long, narrow and drooping, giving the plant an almost bamboo-like appearance. The foliage color is a lovely muted gray/green and withstands direct sunlight better than most other species of tree *Ficus*.

F. microcarpa – (Indian Laurel or Banyan Fig) is a rapidly growing rounded shrub which tends to produce many aerial roots when grown in humid conditions. The small glossy green leaves are oval-shaped and alternate up the stem. It can form a massive trunk up to 3' in diameter and has reddish/gray bark with noticeable horizontal flecks called lenticels, which help with gas exchange. It is one of the best *Ficus* varieties for bonsai. Keep an eye out for thrips which are tiny light brown insects, shaped like miniature grains of rice.

F. pumila – (Creeping Fig) is a many branched, creeping plant with small heart-shaped, thin green leaves less than an inch long and slightly puckered. It will produce aerial roots when it has something moist to cling to or the ambient humidity is consistently high, and looks very attractive when grown on a moss-covered pole. Most growers use it as a trailing plant or as a groundcover in plant troughs or terrariums. Creeping fig will tolerate lower light levels and temperatures than most *Ficus*, but requires more consistent water.