

# Ficus Retusa “Golden Gate” and other similar Ficus

Ficus Retusa boasts over 800 species, and is a beloved favorite of bonsai enthusiasts new and experienced alike. Most varieties are tropical evergreens and make good indoor plants. The Fig Tree's existence on earth can be traced back 60 million years, so owning one of these is like having a little piece of living history.

## Trees Attributes:

The Golden Gate is an attractive cultivar for bonsai, sporting small, shiny, dark green foliage. The trunk is thick, sturdy, and grayish, adorned with white stripe-like patterning that gives it the nickname Tiger Stripe or Tiger Bark Ficus. Like most of its species, this cultivar is a popular choice for bonsai due to its easy care and forgiving tolerance of new enthusiasts' errors. **Like all Ficus, the leaves of this plant are toxic to pets so care should be taken to keep the plant and it's dropped foliage away from furry friends.**

## Temperature/Lighting/Location:

Outside of its tropical home climates, Golden Gate can be grown as an indoor plant. It can spend some time outside in the summer, provided the temperature isn't below the mid-50s. Too much fluctuation in temperature will cause leaf drop. Full sun is best for the Fig Tree but it will survive in less optimal lighting conditions as well. These trees also love humidity so a humidity tray or regular misting can benefit their foliage. They dislike drafts, whether hot or cold. The tree must be moved if you notice leaf discoloration or dropping due to draft exposure.

## Watering:

The Golden Gate Ficus, like its sibling varieties, is very forgiving of over- and under-watering. It is a great choice for those who are just starting out in the art and may forget to water the plant. That said, the tree should not be permitted to completely dry out down to the roots. It will normally recover if under-watered but check regularly to make sure it has adequate moisture. Water should not sit in the bottom of the pot because root rot could develop.

I tell you to water every day because you will check it every day!!! If it's soaking wet the skip a day but this soil can dry out faster than you can see and especially in the warmer months it will love a good bath every day.

## Fertilizing:

Ficus respond remarkably well to feeding, and will exhibit new growth almost right away. The tree should be given a balanced formula every two weeks during the growing season. Reduce this frequency to monthly during the winter. You may alternate regular fertilizer with a high nitrogen mix at half-strength every other feeding to encourage foliage growth. I use a slow release organic fertilizer such as Dr. Earth “Life” or Espoma Tree Tone. If you want to use liquid try and find an organic one or even fish emulsion.

## Pruning/Training:

Styles – one of the main attractions of this species is that it is suited to nearly any bonsai shape. Informal upright, windswept, literati, cascade and group plantings are easily accomplished with most Ficus.

Pruning may be done at any time of year but scarring may be less noticeable if done in summer or fall. Make cuts, using bonsai scissors, either flush or concave to the trunk. These trees are in the rubber family and will bleed milky latex; when it dries it will form its own seal. Trim shoots down to one or two leaves after they have developed three to four nodes. Use your shaping preference as a guide for where to make these clips. To attempt leaf size reduction, wait until a shoot has six to ten leaves then trim it down to two to four.

Wiring of Ficus may be done but because it grows so vigorously during the growing season, you will need to watch the wires very closely to avoid cutting in. Branches should be slightly hardened before wiring, but not too hard because they resist redirection if they are too lignified. A good rule of thumb is to only wire branches that are under a half inch in diameter.

Anymore, the only time I am not doing work on Ficus is in January or February unless I have a humid green house to work in.

### **Propagation:**

Golden Gate Ficus is best propagated by cuttings. These should be taken in summer in about a four inch length, cut with clean, sharp bonsai shears. Only take cuttings from a healthy tree. Rooting hormone may be used, then plant the cutting into river sand in a small pot. Wait a month then carefully check the root growth by tipping the pot. Trim all leaves except the top ones and then replant in sand and place in shade for a couple of weeks. After this time, give the plant liquid seaweed fertilizer and then switch to a hydroponics feed. In about three months your cutting should have a developed root system and be ready for potting.

### **Repotting:**

Fig Trees can go two to three years between repotting. This should be done at the start of spring, and before growth has really kicked in. A normal bonsai potting soil may be used, and roots respond well to pruning.

Summer is also a great time to repot when the tree is in full strength. Supplement your bonsai soil with extra pine bark or Akadama to retain extra moisture.

### **Insects/Pests & Diseases:**

Ficus can fall prey to spider mites, scale, or mealy bugs, but overall this species is hardy and disease resistant. Most insect problems can be controlled or eradicated with a spray of a teaspoon of dish liquid in a quart of water. Spray foliage until run-off is created then spray with plain water.

When inside try to have a fan moving the air in the room. Once a month or two hose the foliage down with a light sink sprayer or it will happen naturally outside with a hose and rain.