

Citrus Trees

Most citrus varieties available commercially are grafted trees in which the upper part, or scion, of one tree has been attached to the rootstock of another tree. These two units grow together as one unit and, in citrus trees, this allows the tree to produce a crop within a few years. Non-grafted citrus varieties grown from seedling take 10-15 years to produce a crop. Most citrus trees produce a single crop of fruit in the fall or winter, but there are some everbearing varieties of lemons, limes, and calamondins. Even the everbearing types have a main fruit-bearing season; this is typically in the spring. Citrus trees do not need a period of complete dormancy; however, their growth does slow in the winter months and care should be adjusted accordingly. The size of the citrus tree will depend on the variety. Most standard size varieties grow 20-30ft tall, but the dwarf varieties are a much smaller tree with the same size fruit. Pruning should only be done to remove weak branches or to keep desired shape of tree and should not be done in fall or winter months. You will need to wear gloves when doing any pruning unless you have a thornless variety of citrus.

Hardiness

Lemons and limes are most sensitive to freezes and colder temperatures. Kumquats, Satsuma mandarins, and calamondins (cross between mandarin orange and kumquat) are the most cold resistant varieties, but it is safest to keep any citrus variety above freezing temperatures. Prolonged exposure to freezing temperatures is more damaging than brief plunges in temperature. ALL citrus fruit is damaged at several degrees below freezing. In our area, it is best to grow citrus trees in containers that can be brought indoors or into a slightly heated greenhouse during the winter. Try to keep them at 70-75 degrees during the day and 45-55 degrees at night.

Growing Citrus Trees in Containers

Citrus trees typically like all the sun they can soak up, but when planted in containers, this makes them a little more sensitive. During the summer, your citrus tree containers should be placed outside in a partially shaded spot. Sunlight is needed for fruit set and ripening, so make sure they are still getting plenty of morning sun. It is vital to keep them evenly moist. Check them frequently, especially on hot and/or windy days. During winter, move your containers indoors to a place where they will receive at least half a day of sun. Mist leaves frequently to maintain humidity. Use containers at least 1 1/2 foot in diameter, and plant them in a light, well-draining soil mix such as Berger Potting Mix. Use a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer at time of planting to keep nutrients from washing out with each watering. We recommend using Osmocote Vegetable and Bedding slow release fertilizer. Potted citrus plants can stay outdoors most or all year in mild-winter climates, but here in Lubbock they should be sheltered during the winter. Inside locate the plant no more than 6ft away from a sunny window and away from radiators and other heat sources. Ideal humidity level for citrus trees is 50%, which is hard to achieve in our dry climate. To increase air moisture, mist the tree frequently; also, try making a ring around the tree with pebble-filled trays of water.

Watering

Fast drainage is essential to successful growth of citrus trees, but the soil must still have some water holding capacity because citrus trees prefer the soil to remain evenly moist. Berger Potting Mix fulfills both of these requirements for your citrus tree. It is important to pour off any water that has accumulated in saucers beneath the your citrus, because citrus trees should never be allowed to remain in standing water. You can cut back a little on frequency of watering during winter after the fruit is harvested, but resume moisture levels again in late winter as spring approaches. Citrus trees are sensitive to salt build-up, so avoid watering them with salty water (our tap water is high in salts, so it is best to use bottled water). Always be sure to maintain consistent levels of moisture for your citrus tree,

never letting the soil dry out or get soggy. Watering more than once a day may be necessary in hot weather. Also, citrus trees need plenty of water when fruiting.

Fertilizing

With citrus trees, it is best to use a balanced, low nitrogen fertilizer such as Osmocote Vegetable and Bedding slow release fertilizer. It has a slow release analysis of 12-12-12. Using a slow-release fertilizer will keep nutrients from washing out with each watering. If you will not be using a slow release fertilizer, be careful not to over fertilize and make sure you are using a balanced fertilizer with low nitrogen numbers (8-8-8, 10-10-10). Citrus trees will need an occasional application of micronutrients (iron, zinc, magnesium). Espoma Garden-tone is a mild organic fertilizer that contains these necessary micronutrients. Apply about 1/4 cup around the edge of the container once every 4-6 weeks. Make sure the fertilizer is not applied on any exposed roots. If necessary, add some soil to the top of the container before applying the fertilizer. In general, do not fertilize citrus during winter when their growth has slowed down. You may resume fertilizing in the spring.

Harvesting

Most citrus trees produce a single crop of fruit in the fall or winter, but there are some everbearing varieties of lemons, limes, and calamondins. Even the everbearing types have a main fruit-bearing season; this is typically in the spring. Many citrus varieties will bear fruit more heavily in alternate years. When harvesting fruit, it's a good idea to wear protective gloves unless you have a thornless variety. The color of the rind can fool you, so tasting fruit is the best way to determine its ripeness. For most citrus varieties, ripe fruit can remain on the tree for at least one month. This makes immediate harvesting unnecessary. Just pick the fruit as you need them. Extra fruit can be juiced and canned or frozen. Citrus fruit ripens only on the tree.

Pests and Diseases

Some common threats, which can be easily controlled, to citrus trees are citrus leaf miner, mites, scale, and mealy bugs. These can be treated with horticultural oil spray. We recommend SunSpray Ultra-Fine Year Round Pesticidal Oil. There are specific instructions on the label for applying the oil to citrus trees. In general, mix 0.5-1.0 Tablespoons per quart of water and spray. We also carry Garden Safe Houseplant and Garden Insect Spray in a convenient, ready to use bottle. This spray kills all stages of insects, including their eggs. Both are safe for edibles and are excellent products for controlling unwanted pests. Greasy spot is an occasional problem with citrus plants. Treat the plant with either oil spray or a copper fungicide spray, such as High Yield Bordeaux Mix Fungicide, and remove fallen leaves to keep it from spreading.

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