



Citrus Basics

By Debbie Hagar

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Citrus plants are evergreen trees and shrubs that offer attractive form and glossy deep green foliage year round; they flower with a wonderful fragrance and produce delicious fruit. Citrus require full sun and require protection from frost. They are not cold hardy and need special care during the winter months. Some varieties are much more frost tolerant than others. Lemons and limes are most sensitive to freezes. Sweet oranges, 'Improved Meyer' lemon, grapefruit, and most mandarins and their hybrids are intermediate in cold resistance. Nagami Kumquats and Owari Satsuma mandarins are a few of the most cold resistant with kumquats withstanding temperatures in the high teens. Prolonged exposure to freezing weather is more damaging than a brief drop in temperature.

Planting citrus in a container instead of in the ground is a safer alternative in most of El Dorado County because of our winter weather. Placing the container in a sunny, frost and wind free location with southern exposure is the best. Heat reflected from walls, fences and concrete areas help create warmer microclimates. If a freeze is predicted, it's important to make sure your citrus is well-watered. Dry soil pulls moisture from the roots in freezing temperatures, causing damage. Citrus also benefit from being covered with a light fabric and stringing old-fashioned holiday lights in the branches, providing a low heat source. A fan for air circulation helps keep frost off citrus as well.

The best time to plant citrus is when there is no danger of frost and the soil is workable but before it gets hot. Citrus require good drainage in the ground or in a pot. Light is essential for fruit production; provide eight or more hours of sun per day for optimal fruit production. Most citrus have been budded or grafted on different rootstock. Grafted trees begin bearing fruit in just a few years in contrast to ten to fifteen years for seedling trees. Standard citrus trees grafted to a variety of rootstock grow twenty to thirty feet tall. Dwarf citrus are commonly grafted to trifoliolate orange rootstock and produce trees eight to ten feet tall. Dwarf trees are easier to care for, harvest and are more disease resistant.

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Newly-planted trees require watering to a depth of two to three feet. It is important to never allow the root system to dry out and to be consistent in the watering schedule. Watering depends on soil type, time of year and the age of the tree. Fluctuating soil moisture can aggravate fruit splitting, a problem that can affect all citrus, but especially navel oranges. Nitrogen is the main nutrient that must be supplied to citrus. A tree is nitrogen deficient if the green leaves have yellow veins. A young, nonbearing citrus requires one quarter to one half pound of nitrogen a year; a mature tree requires one pound of nitrogen yearly. These nitrogen applications are done in early spring, at fruit set and in the summer. A good citrus formula will also contain trace minerals like iron, zinc and manganese; which are important to prevent yellowing of foliage.

It is fine to remove suckers (branches that arise below the graft line) any time of year. Citrus bear fruit on new growth. In freeze-prone areas don't prune in fall or early winter. Wait until late spring or summer to prune frost damaged trees, new growth will make it clear which wood is dead. If you do prune, the ideal time is just prior to bloom or just after fruit set so the tree can adjust fruit load during the June drop.

Most citrus varieties ripen from late fall into winter. Many types hold their fruit on the tree for long periods without losing quality. Citrus fruit ripens only on the tree; to judge its ripeness pick a fruit and taste it. Ever-bearing citrus, such as lemons and limes, can produce all year, but they fruit most heavily in winter and spring. The Owari Satsuma Mandarin fruit ripens in November and December and is usually picked before the first frost. The Washington Navel Orange is a famous sweet winter ripening variety. The Nagami Kumquat fruit ripens in late winter or early spring. These kumquats are the size and shape of olives and have a bright orange fruit. The Improved Meyer Lemon is very juicy and sweet and a prolific bearer nearly year round but most heavily in winter.

There is no UCCE Master Gardener public education class scheduled this Saturday; Master Gardeners wish everyone a Happy Holiday season. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at the office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Gardeners/ and you can also find us on Facebook.