

About Citrus

Citrus trees are highly desirable plants, offering a number of ways to captivate passers by. The delicious fruit is available in several varieties to please any palate. The dark evergreen foliage is a bold statement in the landscape, and new variegated selections always draw a curious eye. The simple flowers pump fragrant perfume into the spring and fall air, attracting people and pollinators alike to the intoxicating sweetness.

Until recently, growing citrus in the Austin area was limited to those with a greenhouse or a willingness to take extensive measures to protect tender trees on bitter nights; but bitter nights are a thing of the past. Changes in local climate and intense breeding efforts have created a new citrus market in the Texas nursery and landscape industry. Now anyone who wants a citrus tree can have one with little effort needed to protect it from the cold.

Site Selection

Citrus trees prefer a site in full sun, at least 6-8 hours a day. In areas prone to freezes, a spot on the south or southeast side of the house will offer protection from northwestern cold fronts. Good drainage is essential whether growing plants in the ground or a container. Citrus don't like 'wet feet.' Incorporate a mix of compost and either sand or decomposed granite to improve surface and internal drainage.

Growing In the Ground

Many varieties of citrus are suitable for planting outdoors. Trees should be planted at least 5 feet from a house and away from below-ground septic systems. A hole should be dug just as deep as the soil level in the container and up to twice as wide. In soils with a heavy clay content, dig slightly deeper and firm improved backfill material at the bottom of the hole. Carefully remove the plant from the container, place it in the hole and backfill with improved soil and compost, being careful not to cover the root crown with soil. Construct a mulch ring around newly planted trees to direct moisture to the rootball.

Container-Grown Citrus

Citrus trees also make excellent container plants. Growing plants in containers helps keep them smaller in size, which makes it easier to harvest fruit and protect from cold fronts. Choose a pot that is 2-3 inches wider, all the way around, than the original container, and 6 inches deeper. Drainage holes are important. Terra cotta pots breathe and help draw excess moisture out of the soil. However, they can be heavy and difficult to move around without castors or a strong back. Glazed pottery can heat up significantly in full sun and may stunt growth and production. Plastic pots are quite versatile, again, as long as there are unblocked drainage holes.

Use a well drained planting mix to backfill. Metro-Mix, Gardenville Potting, or Ladybug Rose Soil are recommended. Incorporating compost, decomposed granite or sand will help with drainage. Citrus should be re-potted every couple of years into a slightly larger pot.

Cold Protection

It is inevitable that sometime while you have a citrus plant in Central Texas, it will get cold enough to damage your tree. However, there are measures you can take to minimize the damage. For container-grown plants, simply moving them inside or to a protected place for the night will suffice. Water the ground thoroughly a day or so before the anticipated freeze. Wrapping trees with Christmas lights will help keep the temperature around the stems warmer. Draping a blanket over the top of the plant will help trap heat radiating from the ground or lights, but should be removed when temps rise above freezing. Building a frame out of wood or PVC and covering it with plastic will provide adequate shelter, but again, should be removed or vented during the day, provided the ambient temperature is suitable.

If temperatures are going to be very low for a prolonged period, build a 'mulch volcano' around the trunk high enough to protect the graft union. This won't save vulnerable fruit, flowers or stems elsewhere on the tree, but it should save enough trunk to re-sprout if severe damage is sustained. Remove the mulch when the threat of severe cold weather has passed.

Newly planted trees, even those promoted as cold hardy, should be protected from freezing temperatures for a few years to help establish themselves. My general rule of thumb is to protect them until they are too big or troublesome to do so. Hopefully by then they can make it on their own.

Watering

Citrus trees appreciate regular watering while they are actively growing or setting fruit. A thorough soak once or twice a week should be plenty. For container citrus, plastic, metal, and glazed pots hold water longer than wood or terra cotta. Always check the soil moisture to be sure the plant actually needs to be watered. The first 1-2 inches of soil should be dry before watering. When watering your plants, do so at the base only. Avoid watering the foliage of the plant when in flower as to not wash pollen from fertilized flowers.

Fertilizing

Citrus like a fertilizer with a high nitrogen content. Phosphorous fertilizers will help boost bloom and fruit set. Organic fertilizers are preferred so as not to 'burn' plant tissues with salty chemicals. Fertilizing a few times a year with a complete fertilizer will provide adequate nutrition for growth and fruit production. A slow release fertilizer, such as Osmocote, incorporated when planting, will provide sufficient nutrients for up to 6 months.

Pests/Diseases

Grasshoppers, leafminers, stink bugs, and spider mites are the most common pests of citrus. Unfortunately, they are the hardest of the insect pests to control, and physically picking them off the plant, or removing damaged tissue is the best way to control them. The thick rind on many varieties actually helps minimize damage to the edible flesh, even if the outer skin has been attacked. Most citrus diseases are soil-borne and are not an issue with grafted plants. Common products for bacteria and fungi control can be used effectively.

Varieties

Republic of Texas Orange

Dating back to the 1800's, this thorny large tree is very reliable and cold hardy into the low teens.

Cara Cara Navel Orange

Distinct from other oranges, Cara Cara has a pink flesh. Medium size fruit are very sweet with low acidity. Hardy to mid 20s.

Miho Satsuma

A medium size tree producing medium size fruit that is easy to peel and mostly seedless. Cold hardy into the teens.

Okitsu Satsuma

Similar to the Miho satsuma. Cold hardy into the teens.

Kishu Seedless Mandarin

A smaller tree producing smaller fruit earlier than other varieties. The fruit are seedless and easy to peel. Hardy into the 20's.

Improved Meyer's Lemon

A cross between sour lemon and an orange, this is the premiere citrus for home gardens. Small trees produce a bounty of large fruit during multiple flower cycles. Fruit are surprisingly sweet, for a lemon. Hardy into the low teens, this citrus needs no protection when established.

Thornless Mexican Lime

Medium size trees produce bumper crops of small, juicy limes. Hardy into the upper 20's.

Bearss Lime

Also known as Persian Lime, this is what most folks know as a grocery store lime. Nearly seedless fruit can reach 2-2 ½ inches across and ripen a light green to yellow. The almost-thornless plants are reportedly more cold hardy than Mexican Lime and should do fine in areas where lemons are grown.

Eureka Lemon

Commonly grown commercially in California, this almost-seedless citrus bears medium-size fruit repeatedly from winter to summer. Hardy into the mid 20's, special care should be taken to prevent against extended hard freezes.

Lisbon Lemon

Very similar in growth and production to the Eureka Lemon, the nearly seedless Lisbon exhibits slightly more cold tolerance in areas prone to hard freezes.

Honey Mandarin

Small trees produce medium-size fruit that are sweet and easy to peel. This variety has shown promising cold tolerance in Texas gardens.

Rio Red Grapefruit

Larger trees produce large yellow fruit with deep red flesh. Trees are less cold hardy than mandarin and some lemon varieties.

Calamondin

Of the most cold hardy citrus species, this large shrub is often grown as an ornamental. Dark green, glossy leaves are contrasted against by an abundance of fragrant blooms and small, oval-shaped fruit from summer to fall.

Buddha's Hand Citron

Grown as a specialty item in the States, this highly unusual citrus holds traditional and spiritual values in Asian culture where it is often given as gifts or offered at alters or temples. Plants are frost-sensitive. The fruit does not contain any flesh, though the rind is either dried or candied and used in cooking.