



GROWING CITRUS IN CONTAINERS

Citrus is fun and rewarding with fragrance that can fill a room. The bright colors of the fruit, and the glossiness of the foliage, make handsome additions to your deck, patio, or sidewalk. Tree-ripened citrus fruits are a homegrown luxury, providing a taste sensation not available in store-bought fruit. Even the leaves and the rind of the fruit have interesting, fruity scents. You can even tell a lime tree from a lemon tree from the scent of a crushed leaf!

GROWING CITRUS IN POTS

These trees are temperature-sensitive and will not live through the hard freezes typical of Hampton Roads winters if planted in the ground. Plastic pots are best. Because of the weight factor, plants will be brought in, then taken outside in winter more than once. Set the plastic pots in your favorite decorative patio pots outside. Potted citrus are grafted, and are perfectly happy to live out their lives in pots.

LIGHT

All-day direct sun is the most important factor in successful citrus culture. This is usually easy-to-find in Hampton Roads, even in winter. Your citrus trees should be outside, in full sun, every day of the year, except when temperatures drop below about 38-40°F.

NO SUN: NO LEAVES is the rule of thumb. No leaves: no flowers; no fruit. When cold-temperature warnings occur, bring potted trees into the house and place in a south-facing window.

This is the window that, in winter, will receive the most sunlight. Light travels in a straight line, so make sure the light strikes the leaves.

Check the weight of your pots several times, the first week after potting. Before it feels half-dry, water again, on all sides of the pot, until water drains out the bottom. Always make sure your pots have holes for drainage, or your plants will drown.

PLANT FOOD

All plants in pots must be fed if they are to grow to their potential—to make the flowers and fruit you expect. Citrus trees are always doing something: leafing, blooming, ripening fruit, growing wood, so they need regular feeding.

For citrus we recommend:

- McDonald's Greenleaf Plant Food, 12-4-8, slow release, every six weeks
- Espoma Citrus Tone, 3-4 times a year (be sure to follow direction for potted trees)
- Liquid Chelated Iron, 3 times a year. This can be done as a foliar spray or a drench.

LIFE CYCLE

Most citrus trees bloom heavily once a year, usually in late winter or early spring. Exceptions are Meyer Improved Lemon and Calamondin Orange, which bloom sporadically throughout the year with good care, besides giving you a heavy bloom in winter.

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INDEPENDENCE
1144 Independence Blvd.
757.464.5564

GREAT NECK
1276 N Great Neck Rd.
757.962.7596





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You can expect a crop of ripe fruit as follows. Large fruit take longer to ripen!

- Lemons - 9 months to turn yellow, let hang another 3 weeks for tree-ripened goodness.
- Lime - same as lemon.
- Mexican (Key Lime) - 5-6 months.
- Calamondin Orange - 4-6 months.
- Mandarin Orange - 6-8 months.
- Kumquat - 5-7 months.
- Orange, Tangerine, Tangelo - 9-10 months.
- Grapefruit - 11-12 months.
- Kaffir Lime: leaves are used in cooking, available at any time.

BLOOMING AND POLLINATION

Citrus are self-fruitful, as long as pollen from one flower is spread to a different flower (even on the same plant). Because they bloom in winter, there are times when insects will not be around to pollinate citrus flowers. The wind can pollinate the flowers, if there is a heavy bloom or two citrus of the same variety blooming simultaneously. However, if temperatures are freezing, and the citrus plants are in your house, YOU must be the pollinator by doing the following: Locate the flowers that have opened most recently (bright gold pollen and fresh white petals are the best). Pollen stays alive for only 36 hours. Transfer pollen from one fresh flower to the sticky center of another fresh flower using a paintbrush, or finger, or whatever else comes to hand. Or, pick one flower and touch the pollen to the center of another. Do this several times a week during blooming. In warm spells, even in winter, bees will come from up to 1/2-1 miles away to visit your trees.

NURSING YOUR CITRUS CROP

Given the length of time it takes to ripen the fruit, you must take good care of your trees throughout the year. A citrus plant will only ripen as much fruit as the care you give it allows. Do not be surprised if you find your tree dropping unripe fruit, and/or leaves, if you do not water, fertilize, provide proper light, etc. They are tough, however. Even if they go through a serious leaf-drop, usually they will recover and sprout again when the problem is corrected. Don't wait too long before resuming good care.

TEST FRUIT FOR RIPENESS

Fruit is ready to harvest when it has colored up and gives a bit to pressure from your thumb. Give it a squeeze—it will tell you. When fruit is not hard any more, it's ready, or close to being ready. Your own taste buds will teach you when to pick. If you wait too long to pick ripe fruit, it will begin to wither.

PRUNING

Right after you collect your main crop of fruit, and before the next blossoming period (usually mid to late winter), it is time to prune. Pruning is training, and pruning stimulates new growth. Flower buds form most often on the tips of the new growth. Pruning is good for your citrus trees if done properly. Once a year, observe the size and shape of your tree. If it has grown quite a bit, you may wish to prune it to keep it to a manageable size.

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Select a leaf growing on the outside of a branch, then shorten it by no more than 1/3 of the current length, cutting just above the leaf. Remove branches by cutting back to a main stem if they have already grown toward the center of the tree, or if they are running another healthy branch. Broken or damaged branches may be removed at any time; cut back to a leaf growing on healthy wood.

REPOTTING

Potting soils break down with age, so it is appropriate to repot your tree once every year or two. Do this right after you prune. You may select a pot 2-4" larger than the one its growing in now. Hint: The larger the pot, the heavier it gets, and the more work it is to bring it inside in winter and take it back out into the sun. Choose a potting mix that drains well and does not contain moisture retention material or dirt. Check the root system at this time, and if it has wrapped around the root ball, loosen it or cut through the bottom 2: of root in 3-4 places. This will allow new roots to emerge.

PRO-TIP: Use McDonald Garden Center Potting Mix, and treat with root stimulator after repotting.

You can also repot the tree into the same pot as long as it is at least 12" in diameter and you plan to keep the tree no bigger than it is now. Be sure to prune every year in this case.

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