



Growing Citrus in Containers

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Citrus plants grow naturally in tropical and sub-tropical regions of the world where they thrive with warm temperatures, high humidity and sandy, slightly acidic soil. Beginning in the 17th century Europeans began to grow potted citrus trees in Orangerie and Limonaia houses. In hardiness zones where winter temperatures typically fall below 25 degrees F citrus trees need protection on from freezing temperatures. Winter temperatures ranging between 26-28 degrees F will freeze citrus fruit. Growing citrus plants in containers enables the home gardener in these zones an opportunity to have a successful fruit harvest.

Small citrus varieties such as Improved Meyer lemon, Kumquats, Key lime and Calamondins are relatively easy to grow in containers.

They are usually grown on grafted root stock,

As a result, the tree will be dwarfed and therefore suitable to container gardening. Plastic and other decorative pots are good container choices since they are relatively lightweight. Nursery plants are usually sold in 2-to-3-gallon containers and in 3 to 5 years the plants will need to be repotted up to a maximum of 15 gallons. A pre-mixed, commercially available Citrus-Cactus potting soil is recommended. The container should have excellent drainage since citrus does not like "wet feet".

During hot and dry weather daily watering is needed once the first 1"-2" of surface soil is dry. Citrus thrives in warm and humid conditions. Several applications of fertilizer during active growing seasons (spring through late summer) is required to maintain health. A slow-release fertilizer (12-6-6 or 12-4-6) is recommended. Alternately, a liquid fish emulsion may be applied when watering. There are commercially available fertilizers specific to citrus plants that can be purchased.





Citrus trees need 6 or more hours of direct sunlight a day. Southern exposures in a warm room are ideal. If the ambient light is insufficient, a fluorescent or LED grow light will be necessary. The tree can be



Meyer Lemon

placed outdoors during the spring (after all frost danger in the zone has passed) and can remain outdoors in the summer, it is important, however, to move the plant indoors in the fall when the threat of frost is imminent in the area. Citrus plants can tolerate 40-to-50-degree Flows outside.

Clusters of fragrant flowers develop at the end of the stems. Depending on the variety, most citrus flowers in the spring to set fruit that will be ready to harvest in the fall and winter indoors. Other varieties may flower on and off year-round (i.e. lemons, limes, kumquats).

Most citrus plants do not require cross-pollination to be productive and will set fruit on a single plant indoors given a little help from hand pollination. If the plant is outdoors during the spring and summer, bees and other insects will naturally pollinate the flowers. The typical time from flowering to harvest is 6 to 9 months for lemons & limes and 1 year for oranges.

Prune in the fall when bringing the plant indoors to maintain the desired height and form. As with any plant, watch for signs of insect infestation year-round. The most common pests on citrus are scale, aphids and mites. Applications of horticultural oil (i.e. Neem oil) or insecticidal soap are good treatment options. Follow the recommendations on the label to treat the plant based on the severity of the infestation.

Following the above recommendations will reward the home gardener with delicious fruit!





References:

- Mississippi State University Extension: publication P2542 [Growing Citrus In Containers](#)
- Penn State University Extension: 7/5/2023 [Grow Your Own Lemons](#)
- University of Wisconsin Madison Extension: [Indoor Citrus](#)
- University of Maryland Extension: 3/13/23 [Growing Dwarf Citrus](#)

