

Ask the Master Gardener

Date: June 4, 2006

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In our temperate Northwest climate, we can grow dwarf citrus in containers indoors in the winter and then move the containers to a sunny deck or patio for the summer. Fine, you say, but why would I want to grow citrus when I can buy all I can eat at the supermarket?

If you are a cook, there are some ingredients that are very hard to find like Meyer lemons for pie and Kaffir lime leaves for Thai recipes. If you like to fiddle with picky things, you can be a "mad pollinator" with your trusty paintbrush to get more fruit. If you like the scent of blossoms in your house, this one's for you. And if you like to impress guests with the exotic, there's nothing more impressive than picking your own lemons for fresh lemonade right in front of your friends. Finally, these trees can add humidity to your dry house air making you feel warmer.

Growing the citrus of your choice requires the following:

1. A container about 8 inches wider and deeper than the root ball of your tree with very good drainage. (You'll need to replant every 2 or 3 years but only into a somewhat larger container.)
2. A drainage tray on casters about the diameter of the end of the branches of the tree. Fill with about 1 inch of pebbles to provide more moisture in the air and allow for better drainage. Citrus love humidity so water added to the top of the pebbles will provide evaporation.
3. Commercial potting mix or a mixture of cedar wood shavings, sand, and compost. Do not use dirt.
4. Excellent sunlight, particularly a western or southern exposure.
5. Good air circulation but no drafts.
6. Consistent watering. (More about this later.)
7. A 3-1-1 fertilizer (more nitrogen than phosphorous or potassium) is best. Apply according to package directions or fertilize about once a month. Or you can mix the fertilizer ¼ strength and feed the plant weekly from mid-spring until late summer. Discontinue feedings in winter. Yellowing leaves indicate a lack of fertilizer or poor drainage.
8. Temperature in summer should not be hotter than 87F and the minimum temperature in winter should be 40F. So our Skagit Valley climate should keep our trees happy.

Potting: Place one inch of gravel and then one to three inches of potting mix in the bottom of your container. Gently remove the plant from it's old container taking care to keep the root ball intact. Place the root ball in the new container and fill with fresh potting mix. Press the soil firmly around the root ball and fill until the top of the roots are just beneath the top of the soil. You should have a gap of a few inches between the surface of the soil and the lip of the container to allow you to water without overflow. Water deeply and let drain.

Watering: Citrus prefer infrequent, deep watering usually about twice a week. They want moist soil but don't want their feet wet or soggy (just like the rest of us Washingtonians). It is a good idea to invest in a moisture meter that will read moisture at the root level. Only water when the roots need it. A sign that a tree needs water is that the leaves will droop. However, it is not a good idea to wait for the tree to beg for water. If your tree doesn't respond with perkiness after watering or if the leaves turn yellow or cup, you have watered too much. Water in the morning

unless your plant is asking for water.

Pruning: Well-pruned trees have higher fruit yields and are less prone to breaking branches. Prune the tree for shape, balance, and to allow sunlight to reach into the tree. Do not be afraid to prune dwarf fruit trees because it stimulates growth. Also prune back any growth that emerges from below the graft (the knobby areas on the trunk). This is sucker growth and will drain vitality from your tree.

Pollinating: Most citrus are self-pollinating but you can stimulate more fruiting by transferring pollen among the flowers with a small watercolor brush.

Controlling Pests: If you find scales, aphids, or mites on your tree, spray the tree with insecticidal soap. Check the tree every time you water (particularly in the joints where the leaves join the stem) and you will catch the problem before it becomes a real chore.

Moving: You can move your tree(s) outdoor to a sunny spot after the last frost and indoor before the first frost. Move it to a shady spot for a few days to let it acclimate before moving it into intense sunlight. Also move it to a shady spot before bringing it back indoors. Do not be surprised if you lose leaves when you move the tree. This is its way of adjusting to changing conditions and it should perk up within a week or so. As with any other plant that is moved, check carefully for pests before moving.

It will take about three years of growth before you will get fruit. Let the fruit ripen on the tree because it will not ripen after it is picked. Lemons and limes hold on the tree for months. Recommended dwarf citrus varieties are Meyer lemon, Dwarf Bearss seedless lime, Minneola tangelo, Kaffir lime and Owari Satsuma mandarin orange. You can often find them at Wal-Mart, K-Mart, or Home Depot. Check on-line for Four Winds Growers www.fourwindsgrowers.com or Google "citrus trees".

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.