

# Growing Meyer Lemons in the Northwest

by Carol Barany

**D**ays of daytime highs in the fifties, followed by a few days when temperatures dropped down to the low teens, were enough to fill Yakima's night skies with gardeners' dreams of escaping the freeze. Born and raised in Buffalo, New York, Yakima winters shouldn't give me all that much to complain about. Buffalo winters are as bad as you've heard.

If a trip to the tropics isn't on your calendar, bringing the tropics to your home is the next best thing. And who doesn't need a project in February?

You can grow your own lemon, lime, orange, or grapefruit tree from seed. You'll need fresh seeds, straight from the fruit; potting soil, and a container with good drainage. Rinse a few of the very plumpest seeds, and plant them about one-half inch deep. Move the pot to a warm spot and keep the soil as moist as a wrung out sponge. Within a month or two, the seeds should sprout. Pick the strongest one and pull out the rest. Move the pot to a window with bright light, and then move it outside in the spring.

I should mention one more thing. Growing citrus fruit is not for the impatient. It could take a citrus tree grown from seed 15 years to produce fruit. If you can't wait that long, just purchase a more mature tree. This is the time of year when potted citrus plants start showing up in plant shops and nurseries.

I learned from several Yakima Master Gardeners that Meyer lemons are a favorite. Oregon State University Extension agrees, calling self-pollinating Meyer lemons "a no-brainer for container gardening in the Northwest". Other citrus is available in dwarf form and can be grown in containers, but Meyer lemons, which grow in the three to four feet range, by far the most popular.

Grown for indoor home use, these dwarf citrus varieties are cuttings either grown or grafted on a dwarfing rootstock, and tend to start fruiting after just two to three years. But it may be the flowers that thrill you the most, filling your home with one of nature's most heavenly scents.

Your coolest room, where temperatures range between 55 and 68 degrees, makes a perfect winter home for a Meyer lemon. Citrus trees don't go dormant in winter, and although their growth will slow, they still need adequate light and humidity. Provide at least eight hours of bright light daily. A shallow saucer of pebbles, partially covered with water, and set under the lemon tree's pot, adds some Florida humidity to dry, indoor Yakima air. Keep the bottom of the pot from sitting in the water.

Water thoroughly when the soil is dry 2 to 3 inches deep, and just enough to keep the root ball from completely drying out. Avoid soggy soil.

Fertilize once a month when the plant is indoors and twice a month when outdoors. Use a citrus fertilizer, or one for rhododendrons and blueberries. Meyer lemons also love acidic soil. Follow label instructions for mixing.

Most Meyer lemons can be kept in 10-12 inch pots for several years. Larger containers will allow the tree to grow bigger and more productive, but are more difficult to haul in

and out of the house. A deep pot will not tip over as easily as a shallow one, something to keep in mind as your tree grows and becomes top-heavy.

As soon as outdoor temperatures remain above 50 degrees your citrus tree can be moved outside for the summer. Start in a sheltered, partly shaded spot, gradually moving the plant to an out-of-the-wind, sunny site. Areas near the house, or where they can bask in reflected heat, are warmer microclimates that Meyer lemons love. When moving your tree between the indoors and outdoors, avoid sudden temperature swings of more than fifteen degrees. The shock can cause it to lose leaves, and lemons.

As fall approaches and temperatures begin to drop, plants will need preparation for moving back into lower-light indoor life. About a month before our first predicted frost, leave the plant in direct sun during the morning, but move it to shade in the afternoon. Do this for two weeks. After growing it in complete shade for another two weeks, bring it inside.

Just before you do, give the tree a blast of water with a garden hose to remove any unwanted insect pests. Before Yakima Master Gardeners bring container plants into their greenhouse for overwintering, they treat every plant with insecticidal soap to kill any bugs missed by the hose. Plants not usually prone to pests and diseases when grown outdoors can attract aphids, mites, scale, or mealy bugs when grown in an indoor environment with few natural predators.

With good care, your Meyer lemon will start blooming and bearing fruit. My first Meyer lemon tree produced a dozen lemons in its second season. My two-year old grandson proudly picked every single one, while they were still green and inedible. Now six, he still enjoys hearing that story.