

Growing Citrus In Containers

Ted Cowley-Gilbert and his wife Brandy*

Sunday, December 15, 2002

Container citrus growing is fun, easy and productive. Containers allow folks in temperate climates, apartment dwellers, and even those of us in the subtropical zones to enjoy fresh homegrown oranges, kumquats, lemons and limes. With a few simple steps, anyone can enjoy successful citrus growing.

CONTAINERS; They can be plastic, metal, ceramic, wood or whatever you come up with, as long as they are large enough for the plant, and have adequate holes in the bottom to provide drainage. A pot about 15 inches across and 15 inches deep is a good size to start a young tree. Plan to provide a dish or plate to protect floors and carpets from water. Don't allow the bottom of your container to sit in standing water.

SOIL; Most commercially available potting soils are fine for citrus, or you can mix 1 part clean sand, 1 part peat and 1 part pinebark. Some citrus rootstocks require a more acid condition; be sure to ask your nursery what rootstock your tree is grafted on.

POTTING; Partially fill the container with soil, so that when you put the plant in, the original planting level (the top of the rootball) is about 4 inches below the rim of the pot. Fill up the pot to the planting level, and gently tamp it in. Water thoroughly to settle the roots and eliminate air pockets.

LIGHT; The more the merrier. Citrus trees grow best in full sunlight, and indoor plants are usually limited by lack of light. Avoid drastic changes in the amount of light your tree receives; if you're planning to bring it indoors for the winter, start about three weeks ahead of time to gradually move it into shadier and shadier spots.

WATER; Although potted trees are especially vulnerable to dryness, most watering mistakes involve overwatering. Sun exposure, hot or windy days, and air-conditioning will increase the need for watering, while cool cloudy days have the opposite effect. As a rule of thumb, wait until the top inch or two of soil is dry to the touch, and then water by slowly filling the container until thoroughly wet.

FERTILIZER; You can use a slow-release formula every two months, or a liquid feed every other week. Look for a mix that includes the micronutrients iron, zinc, manganese, molybdenum, copper, and boron. Read and follow label directions, and watch your trees. Fertilizer problems usually show up at first as discolored or misshapen leaves.

CULTURE; Container citrus should be pruned to maintain a balanced shape, and to keep exuberant limbs from outgrowing the trees crown. Trees that aren't getting enough sun will become leggy. Partially prune leggy branches to encourage branching and bushiness, and try to find a sunnier spot.

Periodically, trees will outgrow their containers. This is usually signaled by leaf shed or

browning, and twig dieback, unrelated to drought stress. At this point, you have two choices: move the tree to a larger pot, or lift it out, prune the roots, and put it back in the pot with some fresh soil. Remember that the ultimate size of the tree is directly related to the size of the container.

If you want a larger tree, choose a new container, about 25% bigger, repot the tree, and fertilize as soon as the first new growth appears.

If you are happy with the size of your tree, lift it out of the pot, cut about a quarter of the roots off, shake off the loose soil, and pot it with new soil, just as you would a new tree. Prune at least a third of the foliage off at the same time.

Citrus trees are pollinated by bees. Be sure to set your trees outside when they are in bloom, so the bees can do their thing, and your trees will be able to do theirs.

If you can't get the bees and the trees together, you'll have to fill in for the bees. Get a small camel hair artists brush, gently pass it along the yellow pollen-covered stamens until the brush is coated with pollen, and touch it to the central pistil. You have just created a baby fruit! Repeat for each bloom.

FRUIT; Most citrus trees are too enthusiastic for their own good. You have to control them. Don't let small, young trees set too much fruit. You have to be very serious about thinning the blossoms. A 5-gallon tree should only be allowed to set 4 to 6 fruit the first year. The true goal of container culture is the perfect homegrown fruit. As your tree matures it will provide you with crop after crop of delicious citrus.

**Ted Cowley-Gilbert and his wife Brandy own Just Fruits and Exotics Nursery in Medart. They are members of the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Advisory Committee.*

[\[Back\]](#)