

Citrus in the Foothills

By Phyllis Lee

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Growing citrus can be very rewarding and it's wonderful to harvest their beautiful colors of yellow, orange and green from our own backyards when days are short. A freshly picked lemon brings life to dishes prepared during the winter months. So what citrus tree do you plant to satisfy your sense of taste, level of sweetness, and desired tree size? What should you consider when temperatures and growing conditions are not as friendly as they are in Southern California?

Think of the citrus groves north of Placerville. Many mandarin varieties are more cold tolerant than other citrus. The most tolerant to cold in order from most to least are the: kumquats, mandarins, "quat" hybrids, and some oranges or lemons. A Yosemite Mandarin can take temperatures in the mid 20 degrees Fahrenheit, where as most oranges and lemons do not tolerate temperatures below freezing for an extended period of time. Varieties that are less hardy benefit from being grown in a pot that can be moved next to a wall that radiates heat or even brought indoors for the night. A few varieties, like the Clementine Mandarin, require cross-pollinating with another citrus variety.

In general, citrus trees are grown on rootstock that is of a different variety than the scion or top of the tree. This provides the variety with characteristics such as disease resistance and tree size. Purchasing citrus grown on dwarf stock is recommended as it makes it easier to grow the tree in a pot. When planted in the ground, semi-dwarf trees can grow up to 15 ft. tall and 10 ft. wide. Check with your local nursery for their recommendations that match your tastes. Many allow you to "taste" the fruit on the tree to help with your decision.

The best time to plant citrus is after danger of frost and before the onset of hot weather. Citrus require full sun throughout the day and good drainage. If your soil is slow to drain, a raised bed or pot will do. Plant your tree in a hole that is as deep and wide or wider than the root ball. Make sure that the tree is not buried below the graft union (a dog leg shaped point on the trunk) and allow for settling of the soil. If the trunk is allowed to stay wet, citrus can develop Phytophthora root rot, or fungal disease.

Citrus trees are fairly easy to care for except during freezing temperatures. If temperatures below 32° F are predicted for an extended period, citrus in pots should be moved next to walls that radiate heat. For all citrus, apply water one day before and the day of the anticipated freeze to increase air temperatures around the fruit. Incandescent lights (older style holiday lights) may be placed in and around the tree. Tent the tree with a "blanket" that is not made of plastic material and do not allow it to rest on the leaves. The trunk may be wrapped with a thermal blanket, corrugated cardboard, or a thick ply of newspaper for additional tree protection.

Nitrogen is usually the only nutrient that needs to be supplemented in this county. A mature tree requires 1-3 lbs. of nitrogen per year, and as always, check the label and

follow directions carefully. Even, regular watering is important for blossom set and the health of the tree. However, don't be alarmed when many of the blossoms drop; citrus is self-thinning. Citrus do not require frequent pruning. Removal of dead wood and suckers may be done at any time of the year.

Additional information on growing citrus trees may be found at:

<http://homeorchard.ucdavis.edu/files/140618.pdf>.

Master Gardeners are available to answer citrus and home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.

The free Master Gardener Saturday classes begin again on January 5th, 2013. Learn all about the art and science of shaping and training fruit trees when Master Gardeners present "Pruning and Remedial Pruning of Deciduous Fruit Trees." The class starts at 9:00 a.m. and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

Master Gardeners will present a workshop on Edible Landscaping on January 26th in El Dorado Hills. The \$15 fee includes lunch and refreshments. Register on line at <http://ucce.ucdavis.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=9516> or contact the Master Gardener office for more information.