

The Press Democrat
March 08, 2025

Here's how you can grow citrus in Sonoma County

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Mandarin oranges at the Santa Rosa Farmers Market outside Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial Hall.
Photo: Kent Porter/The Press Democrat

Those of us who love fruit look forward to early summer's apricots and berries, summer's plums and peaches and fall's apples and pears. With winter comes the "golden apples" we call citrus, just in time for the holidays. In response to questions we've received about citrus care, we share some points to keep in mind when managing those juicy fruits.

If you're thinking about growing citrus for the first time, we recommend that you grow what you love to eat. Research and talk with experts about what varieties do well in your location, microclimate and soil. Winter is the perfect time to make a plan for planting new citrus.

When you're ready to plant your new citrus, look in your yard for a sunny spot that is protected from wind. Avoid planting in areas like lawns that require frequent irrigation. Make sure the area has good-draining soil and access to water. Ideally, install drip irrigation with emitters in a ring around the trunk at the tree's drip line.

Adequate watering is essential to both tree growth and protection from fungal disease. Insufficient watering stunts fruit size and can lead to sunburn. Overwatering may cause root and crown rot. Citrus trees need moisture all year, from 4 to 12 inches of water per month, depending on several variables such as the type of soil, the season and temperature and the variety of citrus planted. To test if your citrus is getting enough water, dig down 4 to 6 inches and grasp and squeeze a handful of soil. If the soil retains its shape, the moisture level is correct. If water squeezes out of the soil, it indicates overwatering.

Because the roots of newly planted trees are shallow, water them close to the rootstock. Water mature trees under their canopies because their roots are established and have grown away from the rootstock.

Winter is the time to harvest and protect citrus from frost. When frost is forecast, protect your trees with old sheets draped over exposed areas or hang old-fashioned Christmas tree lights across the branches. Harvest fruit when its color is vibrant, the size robust and a sample tastes good.

Once picked, the fruit no longer ripens. You can keep it in the fridge for 4 to 6 weeks when stored in single layers with good air circulation.

Keep in mind that young trees take about three to four nonbearing years before they produce well. Also, all citrus trees produce fruit drop in the spring — small fruit that falls to the ground as it develops — so don't be alarmed when that happens with your tree.



Farm to Pantry volunteer Susan Kralovec reaches through high branches to glean surplus oranges from two trees at a home in Healdsburg. The Press Democrat file 2013.

Pruning, fertilizing citrus

Young citrus do not require much pruning. As the tree develops, prune to establish tree structure. Control vigorous shoots by pruning them for a more pleasing appearance.

For established citrus a good time to prune is in late winter and early spring, from February through April and before buds appear.

Check the weather forecast and avoid pruning during rainy periods to avoid fungal and bacterial disease.

As weather permits, prune to open the center of the tree and remove crisscrossing branches. Make sure branches don't touch the ground to keep snails, rats and ants off your trees. Always remove suckers on both mature and young trees.

Somewhat surprisingly, you don't need to thin fruit or prune to keep trees producing. Citrus can also be sheared like a hedge.

Citrus requires fertilizing throughout most of the year except late in the season when fruit develops its full flavor, color and texture.

Fertilize mature citrus with nitrogen in January or February just before bloom. Apply nitrogen again in May and perhaps again in June. Most other nutrients are available in

adequate amounts in the soil. Avoid the tendency to overfertilize citrus, especially young citrus.

Too much nitrogen causes excessive new growth and makes the tree susceptible to other disorders.

Contributors to this week's column were Tim Coyne, Patricia Decker, Karen Felker and Ginny Nichols. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.