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Agriculture & Natural Resources

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION • YOLO COUNTY

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CITRUS

By David R. Giger, Yolo County Master Gardener, 1999

Citrus trees make a wonderful addition to the garden landscape. They have lustrous, emerald-green foliage, sweetly perfumed white blossoms and brightly colored delicious fruit. Most citrus are easy to care for and require minimal pruning and infrequent pest control. They are self-fruiting--no other tree is necessary for pollination.

VARIETIES

Some of the more popular citrus trees grown in our area are the Washington navel orange, Valencia orange, Improved Meyer lemon and Rio Red grapefruit. The navel orange is usually ready to eat by Christmas. The Valencia orange is an excellent juice orange and is picked beginning in mid-April. The Improved Meyer lemon holds its fruit well on the tree and is juicy and slightly sweet when mature. Rio Red grapefruit likes our heat and is red-fleshed. Citrus varieties that are not as common but can also be grown here are Persian limes (acidic), Nagami kumquats (olive-sized), Minneola tangelos (tart) and Mandarin oranges (sweet to spicy).

PLANTING

The best time to plant citrus is in early spring after the danger of frost has passed. Citrus should be planted in full sun. In residential areas the south side of a fence or house is good. Allow room for the tree's ultimate size. Standard trees can reach up to 20 feet high and almost as wide. Dwarf varieties average about 8 feet tall and are also suitable for containers. It is best to avoid lawns because of frequent, shallow watering. Plant trees in soil that has good drainage. Plant the root ball high so that when finished it will be slightly above soil level. Make a generous water basin, but do not let water pool around the base of the tree.

WATERING and FERTILIZING

Keep the soil moist around your citrus. The soil shouldn't dry out nor be soggy. Regular watering is essential but be sure to allow the soil to drain between watering. With heavy soil, water slowly and deeply about every 2 to 3 weeks. Water more in the hot summer and less in the cool spring. Newly planted trees should be watered frequently. Fertilize using a balanced fertilizer containing nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P), and potassium (K) with trace minerals of iron, zinc and manganese. An NPK ratio of 18-6-6 is good. Specially formulated fertilizers for citrus are also available in 5-pound boxes at garden stores. Always read label directions.

PRUNING

Citrus do not require regular pruning to remain productive. They may be pruned for desired shape. If heavy pruning is necessary, do so in early spring before blossoming. Long, fast-growing juvenile growth, which may occur on the inner branches of the trees, should be removed. This growth is recognized in orange trees by the presence of differently shaped leaves and thorns.



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PESTS

Vigorously growing, healthy trees have few pest problems; however, several forms of scale may be observed. These can be tiny brown lumps or white fuzzy or cottony masses. It is best to allow natural predators to control these pests. Ants are attracted to these pests and interfere with natural predators. Ants can be controlled by pruning branches away from fences and buildings. Secondly, a sticky material can be applied to the trunk (but not on young trees). Heavily infected areas can be reduced by either pruning them out or washing with a forceful stream of water. Also, insecticidal soaps and light horticultural oils may be used. Because of edible fruit, insecticides should be used sparingly. Always follow label directions.

FRUIT SPLIT

Fruit-splitting of green navel oranges is not uncommon in the fall. This condition is caused by changes in temperature and extreme fluctuations in water or fertilizer.

FROST

Healthy, well-fertilized citrus trees can tolerate brief dips into the upper twenties. Limes and lemons are more sensitive to cold than mandarins, kumquats and oranges. To protect small trees from freezing on unusually cold nights use outside Christmas lights or a cloth or plastic cover. Be sure that covers are removed during the day and that plastic covers do not touch the leaves.

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