

GROWING CITRUS

Citrus – frozen orange juice, lime slices in our margaritas, grapefruit halves for breakfast, Navel oranges and mandarins in season. And Martin Page in *Growing Citrus: How to grow citrus trees in containers, conservatories, and the open garden* (192pp, Timber Press, 2008) shows us they're even more. They're the most important fruit crop worldwide, exceeding all others; their oil is an effective degreaser, is used in perfumes, and can be substituted for olive oil. Bergamot (another citrus) is a key ingredient in Earl Grey tea. Citrus is used as pectin, and may figure as a cancer cure. Perhaps its most famous historical use was as an antidote for scurvy on 18th century British sailing ships, hence "Limey" for a British sailor.

The Chinese had been growing citrus for hundreds of years before any were introduced to the West. Then came Citron, used in perfume, by 310 B.C. and lemons, in Rome by the first century A.D. In the Middle Ages Arabs brought other citrus from Asia to Spain and Portugal, and thence to the Americas.

Citrus created interest in growing tender plants in cold climates, and gave birth to the orangery, as far north as Russia, in England by the 16th century, and most famously in 17th century Versailles, which held 1,000 trees. Orangeries were huge greenhouses with high south-facing windows and tall doors for moving trees in and out in fall and spring, heated with wood or coal in winter.

Citrus can live to be 100 years old, have glossy evergreen leaves, sweet spring scents and often long, potentially dangerous thorns. They tend to overbear, and too much

fruit can break branches, so fruit drop is natural. They keep better on the tree than off, though one trick for lemons or limes is to juice all the fruit, strain it into ice cube trays, freeze these and keep bags of them for later use.

Two good reasons besides flavor for growing your own – which you can do here in Redding, for sure -- the scent of their blossoms and the scent of the fruit. Commercial fruit is washed to remove natural wax, then sprayed with a scentless edible wax and finally with a fungicide – and that's what it smells like.

Buy a named, not a generic cultivar, with single trunk, and one free of scale insects – *very* hard to eradicate. If the young plant looks puny, prune it by one third in the spring to stimulate new growth.

If you live with frequent frosts, you can grow most citrus in 15" terracotta pots. Use loam, rather than peat-based soil, and refresh the top few inches every three years – perhaps more often in our hot summers. You can top pots with an inch of gravel, to stabilize them in the wind. Use a balanced fertilizer, with trace elements, as often as once a week in summer. Water deeply but infrequently.

When you move them indoors, initially match the inside temperature with the outside, and spray them with warm water daily. When you move them out again, put them briefly in partial shade, out of the wind.

If you live with rare frosts, plant citrus in the ground, in a sheltered spot, on a hill if possible. To protect them from frosts, drape with old-fashioned Christmas lights (not LED) and cover with sheets (never plastic) held on with clothespins. When the trees are too big to cover, surround

them with the sheets, to hold in warm air and send it upward.

We're beginning our fifth year on a warm ridge in Redding, and expect plenty of Meyer lemons, limes, mandarins, grapefruit, and a few oranges. I can't wait to start sniffing the fruit!