

Watering Problems Cause Sour Face Over Potted Lemon, Lime

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Nov. 15, 2019

Q: I have two young trees, a lemon tree and a Mexican lime, in ceramic pots. I'm having some issues with the leaves turning yellow. I also have some burned-looking tips on some of the leaves, and I can't figure out what is going on.

A master gardener suggested this could be a watering issue. I was wondering if there is a rule to watering citrus or is it possible to use a moisture meter to gauge if I am over or under watering.

A: To grow healthy citrus, it's important to follow good irrigation and fertilization practices.

There are many possibilities for the yellowing of citrus leaves. It may be caused by overwatering, and some of the yellowing and burned tips may be caused by under watering. It can be more challenging to maintain consistent moisture and nutrient levels in containers. It's best to keep the roots moist, but not to allow them to dry out completely between irrigations. Also, the container should be allowed to drain freely and not sit in water such as in a drip pan or saucer.



Edible houseplants such as this lemon tree will benefit from outdoor sun while accessorizing your deck or porch in summer. (Photo: Jennifer Rude Klett)

The rule for determining the amount of water to provide adequate irrigation for citrus is about the same as other plants. In general, you need to provide enough water to allow for penetration through the roots of the plant and thoroughly wet the pot. Wait to water again until the top two to three inches of soil dries out. You want the root system to always have some moisture available to it, year-round, but

not remain wet. Irrigation should extend to at least the drip line of the plant, meaning the width of the foliage of the plant. With potted plants that have adequate capacity for drainage, this could be watering until water begins to seep out the bottom, making sure that the water can drain away from the bottom of the pot. If the pot doesn't drain well it's more difficult to determine when you have irrigated through the root ball but not so much that the plant is sitting in water.

High temperatures and exposure to wind will result in the plant needing more frequent irrigation. It's difficult to cite a specific amount of water as it will be impacted by drainage and other growing conditions. One method of evaluating if your citrus plants are getting enough water is to look at the leaves in the morning before it gets warm. If the leaves are cupped inward and the backs of the leaves are a lighter green than the front of the leaves, the plant is water stressed. You want the leaves to be relatively flat and dark green.

When using a soil probes, also called tensiometers, you should enter the probe into the soil on the side of the pot. Angle it into the soil so that it penetrates the soil inside the root ball at a depth of 12 inches below the soil surface.

For more information go to <https://bit.ly/2QjWiD9> or <https://bit.ly/2X9fCVa>.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.