

Return Of Lemonzilla: Big 'Lemon' Begs Bevy Of Questions

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Jan. 17, 2020

Q: Last week's "Lemonzilla" column on citrus sparked quite a few questions and many comments relating to why a citrus tree might have extra-large or misshapen fruit. I will address a few of those questions here.

A: The first comment was about the photo that accompanied the article. The reader asked if the lemon pictured could be a Ponderosa Lemon, *Citrus pyriformis*. I had not viewed the photo when writing the article last week but in looking at the photos it looks like it could be this variety of lemon. I would need a bit more information about the tree to be sure. These lemons have thick bumpy rinds. They're nicknamed "the five-pound lemon" because of their large fruit.

University of California, Riverside's database states, "both the tree and the fruit resemble citron in most respects."

There is little doubt that Ponderosa is a hybrid between citron and lemon. This variety originated about 1887 as seedling grown by George Bowman of Hagerstown, Maryland. It was named and introduced into the nursery trade in 1900. Ponderosa makes a nice ornamental with its purple-tinged flowers and new growth, however it's sensitive to cold and very thorny.

Another reader asked if the fruit pictured could be that of a pomelo tree, *Citrus maxima*. This fruit is the largest of the citrus fruit and is similar to a grapefruit but tastes sweeter.

The fruit of the pomelo tends to be flatter on the bottom, with more of a pear shape than the fruit pictured. The trees are large for a citrus tree: Up to 50 feet tall.

Another reader sent a photo of an orange with a thick rind. The common reason for citrus to have thick rinds, and sometimes strangely-shaped fruit, is an imbalance of nitrogen and phosphorus or potassium. For example, too much nitrogen and not enough phosphorus or potassium can result in a thick rind for most types of citrus, and may keep oranges from ripening.

Nitrogen is usually the only nutrient that needs to be supplemented regularly but trees in pots or planters will need a more complete fertilizer. A mature tree requires one to three pounds of nitrogen per year. As always, check the label and follow directions carefully. In our climate in Shasta County, you don't want to fertilize with nitrogen after the first of September as this may encourage new growth that will be damaged by frost.

Another question was about the best time to plant citrus. It's best to plant new citrus trees after the danger of frost and before the onset of hot weather. Citrus require at least six hours of full sun throughout the day and good drainage. If your soil is slow to drain, like the heavy clay found in my yard, a raised bed, planter or pot will be the best choice for planting.

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 and allow for settling of the soil.

If the trunk is allowed to stay wet, citrus can develop phytophthora root rot, or fungal disease, which will cause the tree to die. Where ever you decide to plant the tree, make sure you can protect it from freezing, either by wrapping with a blanket or bringing it into the garage, on the coldest nights.

Additional information on growing citrus trees may be found at <http://homeorchard.ucdavis.edu/files/140618.pdf>.

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.