

Information to Grow Healthy Citrus

Citrus trees are susceptible to frost as we've just learned. While it is cosmetically unsightly, most of the healthy trees will survive our January frosts.

Be careful when you prune dead leaves. Wait until the end of February, to avoid the possibility of more frost. Commercial citrus growers do not prune their orchards, so prune only to remove suckers or dead branches. Prune suckers that are below the bud union, which will be the rootstock's variety, not the variety of the fruit you chose.

The citrus we have in the Sonoran Desert is always grafted on to rootstock. For many years Sour Orange rootstock was recommended. It tolerates our harsh climate well, along with our heavy clay soils. It is pest and disease resistant, and always produces good fruit. However, Sour Orange rootstock is susceptible to the tristeza virus. Once the rootstock is infected with tristeza the tree will die. We now recommend Carrizo or Troyer rootstocks for full-sized trees and Flying Dragon for dwarf trees. Read the tag on the tree. If it doesn't give you the information on the rootstock, buy your tree someplace else.

If you are planning to add a new citrus tree to your landscape, you will need to decide what kind of tree you want. Mature adult citrus trees average 20 to 25 feet tall and 16 to 18 feet wide. If space is at a premium, choose a smaller tree. Dwarf varieties produce the same size and quality fruit but produce about 50 to 60 percent less.

Citrus trees are purchased in containers, with an intact rootball, as opposed to deciduous fruit trees, which are sold as bare-root plants. Plant new trees after the danger of frost has passed. March and April are the best months to plant citrus. Spring is their most vigorous growing time and the root structures can expand rapidly. Young 2 – 5 year old trees transplant most successfully.

It will be two to five years before a young tree produces significant fruit. In fact, we recommend that fruit be removed from a young tree. If it is left mature, there is danger of breaking the young limbs heavy with fruit.

Watering a newly planted citrus tree should be done every two to three days for the first month. Water deeply and slowly. Water every three to five days for the second and third month. When the tree reaches four months to a year, water every 14 days during the winter and every 7 to 10 days in the summer. No fertilization is recommended until the tree has been in the ground for five years.

Meyer lemons are illegal and not available in Arizona. The Meyer is a known carrier of the tristeza virus, but does not show symptoms itself. However, genetic engineering has succeeded in improving the Meyer and they are allowed to be sold from certified nurseries. These trees have been certified to be free of the tristeza virus at this time.

This article by Master Gardener Glenna Phillips first appeared in the Daily News-Sun on Saturday, February 10, 2007.