

Growing Citrus in Containers

Yes, you CAN grow citrus in the PNW! Many types of citrus trees adapt to container growing in the Puget Sound area, which makes it easier to move them indoors during winter. The following factors are important to consider when growing citrus in containers:

Soil: Soil mixes formulated for outdoor use are preferable to potting mixes for indoor plants, since the later often contain chemical wetting agents, causing tree roots to remain too wet. Citrus should be re-potted every 2 years if/when the plant becomes pot-bound.

Light and Temperature: Citrus need as much light (6-8 hours) and air circulation as possible, such as a south facing location. To reduce excessive heat on the roots, try nesting the plain plastic nursery pot into a slightly larger decorative pot. Be sure the pot never sits in drainage water.

Containers can be transitioned outdoors in late spring/early summer, then back inside in fall when temperatures drop into the 40s. Most citrus will not tolerate temperatures below freezing. Indoors, the plants should be kept in a warm (above 55 degrees) sunny spot. If you do not have a bright (preferably South facing) window, skylight or greenhouse, you may need to use grow lights. The fruit (on most varieties) will begin to ripen about the time you bring the trees indoors. Within a couple months, the trees will bloom again as they're moved back outside for spring.

Water: Citrus prefer infrequent, deep watering to frequent, shallow sprinklings. Water thoroughly but then allow to dry out almost completely before re-watering, especially during their winter resting period. Even if the top soil feels dry, check the moisture level at root level. Yellow leaf drop may be attributed to over-watering.

Fertilizer: Citrus are hungry plants especially when they are leafing out. They require ample food, particularly the micronutrients iron, zinc, and manganese supplied through monthly feeding with an organic fertilizer. During the warmer months, a slow release organic fertilizer will encourage new growth and promote fruiting. They should also be fed (but not so frequently) in the winter.

Bloom & Fruiting: Citrus flowers are white and can fill the room with fragrance! Expect some petal drop after the blooming period is over. Most citrus blooms in the spring and forms fruit which ripens on the tree by winter. In general, smaller fruit ripens faster than larger fruit. It may be necessary to taste fruit to be certain of ripeness.

Pests: Like other plants, citrus may be attacked by pests. Red spider mite, scale, and white fly are the main culprits. Horticultural oil spray is effective in ridding citrus of scale and mites; soap sprays can be used on aphids and mealybugs. Remember to inspect and treat for bugs before you bring them back indoors for the winter.