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Citrus in a Pot

by Liz Rottger, Contra Costa Master Gardener

Short on space? Consider growing your citrus plants in large pots.

SUMMARY

Growing citrus plants in large pots can offer the home gardener lots of flexibility in plant placement, letting almost anyone grow, enjoy, and harvest these plants. Here are some basics to keep in mind.

Is there a true gardener who doesn't complain about not having a large enough garden? Gardeners are always looking for an under-cultivated spot, a languishing plant that might need to be removed, or a neglected corner in their gardens where they can plant just one more rose bush or some other recently discovered favorite. I had long coveted a Meyer Lemon whose lemons are hard to find in stores because their thin skins make them difficult to ship, but couldn't find a large, sunny spot in my garden to plant one.

Imagine my delight when I discovered several years ago that many citrus plants do just fine in pots. I could finally have a Meyer Lemon, the beautiful lemon-mandarin orange hybrid that Frank N. Meyer brought to America from China in the early 1900s. Three years later, I am thrilled with how easy it has been to grow my Meyer Lemon in a pot.

Container Selection:

I purchased a large, 24" in diameter, glazed ceramic pot. A plastic pot with good drainage holes in the bottom would have also worked fine. If you need to have a tray, place a layer of gravel in it, so your pot will not sit in water.

Site Selection:

Select a bright, sunny spot for the pot. Citrus trees want at least six hours of full sun per day, preferably in a south-facing, wind-protected location.

Planting Your Citrus:

I filled the pot with good potting soil and amended it with compost because citrus trees are evergreens and demand a variety of nutrients. You cannot use regular garden soil because it will compact and drain poorly. In early spring I planted my small Meyer Lemon in the middle of the pot, making sure there were no air pockets, so its roots would





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have time to become established before the next winter’s cold weather set in. I left the tree crown just above the soil line and a 2” collar of the pot for watering.

Caring for Citrus in Pots:

Any plant confined to a pot needs an outside source of **nutrients**. From March to September, I use a slow-release-nitrogen citrus tree fertilizer once a month, following the manufacturer’s instructions as to quantity.

Water only when the top inch or two of soil has dried out. Over-watering is a common mistake with many potted plants and it simply washes out nutrients from the root zone. Yellow-green leaves due to iron deficiency, for example, are a sign of this leaching.

Since my pot sits up against a rock wall, I constantly battle **snails** which love the lemon’s tender leaves and in a single night can create dramatic devastation.

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all its tiny fruits, a painful task, but I hoped it would give the tree a stronger root system. Since then, my Meyer Lemon is a veritable tree of life: all stages of plant life—fragrant, purplish flowers, tiny green fruits and lovely yellowish-orange ripening lemons—appear on the tree at the same time. The harvest may not be overwhelming, but it is very satisfying, as are the lemon bars I bake with these wonderful lemons!

If you are not in love with Meyer Lemons, there are other citrus that work well in pots: Rangpurs and Kaffir limes, Satsuma mandarins, blood oranges and kumquats to name a few.

For More Information:

You can obtain more information about growing citrus in general at: <http://ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/GARDEN/FRUIT/citrus.html>.

Advice on managing snails & slugs is available at:

<http://ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7427.html>



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