Growing *Organic* Citrus

Packed full of Vitamin C, every home should have at least one citrus tree in the garden. Few things beat a freshly picked juicy tangerine just off the tree, or fresh lemon juice on your organic salad. Citrus trees have shiny evergreen leaves, fragrant flowers, and attractive fruits that hang for months without dropping. In Northern climates, you can grow dwarf citrus trees in containers and bring them indoors during the winter.

**Selecting Trees**
There are so many types of citrus that you may have trouble deciding which to grow. Edible types include grapefruit, lemon, lime, kumquat, mandarin orange, tangerine, orange, tangelo, and temple orange.

1. Consider the yearly range of temperatures and possible frost when making your selection. When purchasing from Driftwood, you can be assured that we only stock citrus that will grow well in the area. The fruit of all types is easily damaged by frost, but the leaves and wood of some are more cold resistant. In general, limes are the least hardy, oranges slightly harder; kumquats are the most hardy, withstanding low winter frost temperatures.
2. A single mature citrus tree yields more than enough fruit for a family. If you plant more than one tree of the same type, select cultivators with different harvest times, or plant different types of citrus so you won’t be overwhelmed with one kind of fruit. Almost all citrus are self pollinating. A few hybrids are not; be sure to check for the kind you want to buy.
3. Select sturdy, nursery raised trees. A one year old tree should have a trunk diameter of ¾”. A two year old plant should have a diameter of at least 1”. Those with fewer fruits and flowers are better because they have put more energy into sturdy top and root growth.

**Rootstocks**
Most commercially grown citrus fruits are grafted onto rootstocks that are resistant to frost and insect attack. Select the proper citrus for your area if your soil is susceptible to nematode attack and other soil problems. Your local agricultural extension office or a good quality nursery can tell you what rootstock is best for your region.

**Planting**
Citrus trees do best at pH 6.0-6.5. They are not fussy about soil but do require good drainage. If drainage is a problem, plant in a raised soil mound about 1’ high.

1. Select a sheltered area with full sun, such as a sheltered, south-facing alcove of a building. Citrus flowers attract bees, so do not plant them in high traffic areas.
2. Plant citrus in late winter or early spring. Keep the graft union 6” above soil surface when planting. Full-sized trees require at least 25’ between trees; smaller trees need less.
3. Citrus bark is thin & easily sunburned. Wrap the trunk with commercial tree wrap or newspaper for the first year, or plant it with diluted white latex paint.
Care
In dry areas, water newly planted trees at least once a week for the first year. Once established, trees need less frequent watering, but never wait until leaves wilt to water. Water stress can cause developing fruit to drop; prolonged drought causes leaf drop and may kill the tree. Water slowly and deeply; shallow sprinkling does more harm than good. In drought areas, construct a shallow watering basin that extends from 6” away from the trunk to 1’ beyond the drip line. Or install drip irrigation under a thick layer of mulch to conserve water and protect shallow feeder roots. Keep mulch 6” away from trunk.

In citrus growing areas, soils often lack organic matter and nitrogen. Spread compost, mulch, and fertilizer on the soil surface out to the drip line four times a year, beginning in February. This will help to ensure a healthy productive crop that will be full of nutrition for you and your family.

Pruning
Most citrus trees need little pruning beyond removing dead or broken branches. Limit the tree’s size by thinning out fast growing shoots that outgrow other branches. Thin branches rather than shortening them. Remove suckers as soon as they emerge from the ground.

You can revitalize an old unproductive citrus tree by pruning severely in early spring. Wear thick gloves if the tree has thorns. Cut off all branches 2” or larger in diameter flush to the trunk, and feed and water heavily for the next year. Note: Very severe pruning may stop fruiting for up to two years.

Harvesting
Citrus trees usually bear in 3-4 years. It can be hard to tell when citrus fruit is ready to pick. Color is not a good indicator. Fruit can have ripe coloration several months before being ready to harvest or remain green and unappealing even when ripe and juicy inside. Use the taste test to determine when fruit is at its peak flavor. Allow fruit to ripen on the tree before picking. Use pruning shears to cut stems close to the fruit when harvesting. Don’t just pull fruit off the tree. Ripe citrus fruit can remain on the tree for up to three months. Once harvested, citrus can be stored in the refrigerator for three weeks. Enjoy the fruits of your labor. They will be juicy and full of flavor and nutrition.