

Year Round Gardening

Growing Citrus Indoors

By Susan Christine Jones, Colorado Master Gardener

Growing citrus plants in the dry climate of Colorado Springs may sound like a pipe dream for those without access to a cool greenhouse. Happily, some varieties are suitable for container growing indoors. They require a little more effort than a common houseplant, but are well worth it. Both ornamental and useful, citrus charm the senses year round with their shiny evergreen leaves, aromatic edible blossoms, and striking fruits. Inside your home the flowers impart an energizing and uplifting fragrance.

Citrus suitable for growing indoors have been grafted onto special dwarfing rootstock, enabling them to produce regular-sized fruit on dwarf-sized trees. Varieties with low heat and light requirements are favored for indoor cultivation because blooming and fruiting is dependent on adequate heat and light. Choosing a variety that prefers high light and heat will yield a striking houseplant, but will not flower or fruit. When choosing a tree, remember that fruit production begins in the third year. Younger plants cost less, but if you prefer flowers and fruit quickly, select a 2 -3 year old plant. Identify and remove all growth that sprouts from below the graft union. Obtain plants from a reputable source - either a local nursery, or by mail order.



Use a light potting soil formulated for citrus with a PH of 6-7. Avoid fine particle mixes because they compact quickly, and do not use dirt with chemical wetting agents, as they contribute to overly moist soil conditions. Consider the ideal planting container for ease of movement. A clay pot will increase air flow to the roots, but can be heavy. Placing the pot on casters or a plant caddy will make it easy to maneuver to take advantage of optimal conditions. You may want to move your citrus tree outdoors for the summer. If so, gradually acclimate the plant to its new conditions by placing in a semi-shaded area for a few days. Outdoors your tree will require slightly more water than needed indoors.

At least 5-6 hours of sunlight per day is required; more is better. You can supplement with a simple grow light if needed. Choose a location free from drafts and heater vents. A 65° average home temperature is ideal, with a range of 55 - 85°. Abrupt changes in temperature should be avoided. Citrus like humidity, and there are a variety of ways to increase it. Place the pot on a brick above a tray of wet pebbles, high enough to allow airflow beneath the pot's drainage holes. There should be at least 4 - 6 holes in the bottom of the planter. Group several plants around a shallow tray of water set out to evaporate next to the citrus tree, creating a tiny micro-climate of humid air. Mist your citrus daily using rainwater, if possible. Move the plant into a steamy bathroom while the shower is in use.

Never ever let the roots sit in water. Water approximately every 5 to 7 days. Or when the top of the soil looks and feels completely dry to the touch. Always lean on the dry side. Citrus can tolerate some drought, but quickly perish from rotted, soggy roots. Fertilize every 3 weeks in spring and summer, and once every 6 weeks in fall and winter with a high nitrogen (N) fertilizer. The first number in the ratio (nitrogen) should be higher than the second and third numbers (phosphorous and potassium), for example: 3-1-1, or 2-1-1.

Harvest fruit only as needed. Citrus holds fresh on the branches for a long time, and will only ripen on the tree. Remember that in Colorado limes are ripe when they turn yellow (fruit stays green in the tropics).

Photos to help troubleshoot pests, nutrient deficiencies, and cultural problems are available on-line at: Texas A & M University Dept. of Horticultural Sciences: <https://plantdiseasehandbook.tamu.edu/food-crops/fruit-crops/citrus-diseases/> and at the University of Florida: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs141>

Citrus recommended for indoor growing include:

MEYER LEMON or IMPROVED MEYER LEMON (*Citrus x meyeri*)
VARIEGATED PINK LEMON (*Citrus x limon*)
TROYITA ORANGE (*Citrus sinensis* L. Osbeck)
KAFFIR LIME (*Citrus hystrix*)
LIMES (*Citrus aurantifolia*)
CALAMODIN OR KALAMANSI (*x Citrofortunella microcarpa*)
ORO BLANCO GRAPEFRUIT (*Citrus grandis* Osbeck x *C. Paradisi* Macf.)
TAHITIAN ORANGE (*Citrus x limonia* 'Otaheite')
CITRON (*Citrus medica*)
RANGPUR LIME (*Citrus x limonia*)

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