April 3, 2017

GENUS: CITRUS

GENERAL DESCRIPTION:

 Citrus is a genus of flowering trees and shrubs in the rue family. Plants in the genus produce citrus fruits including oranges, lemons, grapefruit, and limes. The fruits have a thick outer rind and thin membranes separating the flesh into segments. They have thorns. Citrus is a subtropical genus. All species and hybrids are evergreen and have aromatic leaves.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AND HABITAT:

Even with the documented history of cultivation spanning more than 4000 years, the exact genetic origins of cultivated Citrus species are obscure although it is general accepted to be Asia, Australia, New Guinea. There are about 25 true species of Citrus from these areas. It is generally believed that Columbus and the Conquistadors brought citrus to the New World to combat scurvy.

Optimum temperature is 58-86 F although most will survive short periods at 32 F. Thus many species make excellent container plants and under cover in our area. So container citrus growing is what the focus is today.

CULTURE FOR GROWING CITRUS IN CONTAINERS:

1. Select the right plants. Citrus can grow large so choose dwarf varieties. Improved Meyer lemons, certain lime, Calamondin tend to stay shorter and more likely to fruit indoors.

2. Select a good container gradually increasing size as tree grows. I use light weight planter type pots. Otherwise the plant becomes too heavy to move. I also use dolleys to set them on to catch the water drain off and move them, of course.

3. Select correct soil mix. Citrus needs well drained soil to help prevent root rot. Commercial potting mixes are fine as long as the soil is light enough to drain water well.

4. Potting up the tree. If bare root, gently pack soil around root to remove air spaces. Mine have always come in pots, so remove plant, examine and look for any dead, broken ore circling roots and repot. Water well.

5. Watering. Citrus prefer infrequent, deep watering. I use a water meter. It can be difficult, especially in winter, to determine water needs. Checking for leaf curl can help but not always and then there’s leaf drop which may be the result of too much water. Low light and some natural drop are also factors.

6. Fertilizing and pruning. Container citrus are heavy feeders requiring extra nitrogen. I use a commercial citrus plant food. The package says use every 10-12 weeks. Prune off any new shoots that arise from below the graft union. These are rootstock shoots and won’t grow into the desired variety. You can remove thorns, but they will diminish with maturity. Prune for shape and balance in spring.

7. Post-season care. Overwinter indoors when the temperatures dip into low 40’s; transition if possible. Check for ants or other insects that may spread scale or other pests. Place in a sunny, south facing location. Water as needed and try to keep some humidity.

8. Insect pests and Treatment. As with any container plants, citrus is subject to spider mites, mealy bugs, aphids and scale. I am particularly troubled with brown scale. I have found the best treatment is horticultural oil being sure to reapply periodically since there are likely more hatching frequently.

9. Propagation. While citrus may ben grown from seed, it takes up to four years or longer to produce fruit. Fruit trees are best grown from grafted trees for quicker fruiting. Many citrus are hybrids. The Calamandon is an important citrofortunella, meaning that it is an intergenetic hybrid between a member of the genus Citrus and the kumquat, formerly considered belonging to a separate genus Fortunella.

SOURCE

There are many sources for citrus. Among the better growers are Four Winds Growers in California and Logees. I may have mail ordered my Meyer lemon and the lime which I’ve identified as a Palestine Sweet Lime came from Homestead Gardens and the Calamandon was a gift.