

Of Lemons & Limequats

Discover the varieties of citrus that flourish in the Tucson area

Maybe it's the seductive smell of orange blossoms or the taste of a freshly sectioned grapefruit, but somehow growing citrus in your garden makes living in the desert seem even more enjoyable—a fact long recognized by desert dwellers throughout the arid world.

The Moors, some of the first desert gardeners, planted citrus in courtyards, where the fragrance of the blossoms wafted through adjacent windows. According to Greek mythology, during their journey across the desert, the Argonauts arrived at a garden filled with beautiful maidens offering "golden apples," delicious spheres that experts now believe were oranges.

Even Tucson's hardcore desert rats have a soft spot in their hearts for citrus. Russ Butros, curator of plants



Kumquats

Considered by most experts to be the most cold-hardy citrus tree, kumquats are consumed peel and all. Harvested over a long season (October–April), kumquats make a superb ornamental plant, fun snack food, and killer marmalade. Because of their small size, kumquats perform well in pots. 'Nagami,' the most common kumquat in cultivation, produces small oval fruit with a sweet rind and tart flesh from spring through fall. 'Meiwa,' a variety that bears fruit with a sweet rind and flesh, is not as commercially available as 'Nagami.'



Limequats

For the weirdos among us, the limequat makes the perfect citrus choice. A cross between the Mexican lime and the kumquat, its fruit resembles a small, oblong lemon. Once in your mouth, expect a slightly less acidic flavor than a Mexican lime, mixed with the sweet peel of the kumquat. And, like the kumquat, you can eat the peel. You'll need to find creative uses for all the numerous limequats that will ripen November through March. Limequats do make a fine lime substitute in margaritas.

at Tohono Chul Park, is a case in point. Ross is the sort of guy who is usually found extolling the virtues of a rare dalea or some other valuable, yet obscure, desert plant, but when you ask him about citrus he gets a mischievous gleam in his eye and says, "If you are going to put in something that isn't native, why not have something you can eat? They [citrus] are also not too bad on water use. These are the golden apples of the Argonauts! Besides, I don't need an excuse, I just like citrus."

But because of its cooler winter temperatures and poorer soil conditions, Tucson has never been a commercial citrus-growing center, especially when compared with the Salt River Valley. However, we can grow some fine citrus in our Old Pueblo backyards. The most successful Tucson citrus gardeners choose the right varieties and plant their trees in carefully chosen areas.

The first thing to consider when choosing citrus trees is not what kind of fruit you like to eat, but where you live.



If you live in Vail, Green Valley, Tanque Verde Valley, Rita Ranch, Rancho Vistoso, Sabino, and areas east of Houghton Road, where winter lows occasionally drop into the high teens, lemons, tangerines, and tangelos can work well if properly sited. Tucsonans in slightly warmer microclimates can expand their options to include Arizona Sweet oranges, 'Oroblanco' and 'McGold' grapefruits, 'Lisbon' lemons, and limequats.



'Lisbon' *Lemons*

Vigorous, productive, and fairly cold tolerant, 'Lisbon' lemons thrive here. Producing a good, high-acid lemon, you'll soon be giving away bags of them to friends, neighbors, and complete strangers. (There lies some truth in the old nursery saying that home gardeners "should only plant one lemon tree per city block.") Unlike the 'Meyer,' which is only mildly tart, the 'Lisbon' yields a real puckering lemon flavor that works well for recipes as diverse as lemonade, lemon bars, and lemon chicken. You won't find a better lemon variety for the desert.



Tangelos

Tangelos, a cross between a tangerine and a grapefruit, are the most underused citrus in Tucson. With their large fruit, sweet-tangy flavor, and exceptional ease of peeling, what's not to like? Furthermore, because of their tangerine parentage, tangelos rank among the more cold-hardy types of large-fruited citrus.

TIPS ON CITRUS PLANTING & CARE

location Choose a warm, sunny spot, preferably on the south or west side of your home. Check the planting hole for good drainage. In cooler areas of town, plant citrus near walls or buildings with southern exposures. If you cannot plant your trees on the southern side of your home, site the trees near buildings or walls that will build up heat during the day and release it at night. Avoid low spots, especially near washes and north-facing areas, as cold air sinks.

planting Dig a hole the same depth and three to five times as wide as the root ball of the tree. Cut the container off of the root ball and ease it into the planting hole. Don't yank the tree out of the container by its trunk—citrus roots are fragile.

best planting times After last frost in spring or early fall.

water After planting, citrus needs regular watering, especially during the first spring and summer. When you water, make sure the root ball is completely saturated. After establishment, most citrus will live on one good soak per week in summer. In winter, you will only need to water every 10 to 14 days.

frost protection On nights when frost is predicted, cover your trees with a woven frost cloth or cloth sheets. Do not lay plastic on the leaves of your tree. Young trees are the most susceptible to frost damage, so if a severe freeze is predicted, wrap the trunk of your small tree with pipe insulation or cloth. Limes and lemons are the most frost-tender citrus so take extra precautions, such as wrapping the main trunk with lights.

fertilization After the first year, fertilize your citrus on Valentine's Day, Memorial Day, and Labor Day. Use a citrus and avocado fertilizer and apply according to the directions on the package.

pruning Citrus need only minimal pruning. Prune after last frost, typically after March 15, if necessary. Only prune out dead and crossing branches, and to even out trees if you have planted three in one hole. Be careful not to leave exposed bark, as this is susceptible to sunburn.



Tangerines

Generally small trees, tangerines (aka mandarins) produce fruit that is easily peeled and sectioned. Because of their ease in peeling, tangerines have earned the common name of "zipper skins." Clementines (aka Algerian tangerines) as well as 'Kinnow' mandarins make excellent selections. 'Kinnow' mandarins have the very sweet flavor associated with tangerine-flavored drinks sold in stores. Almost all tangerines bear alternately, meaning that trees bear heavy fruit one year and a light crop the next. Tangerines planted next to other types of citrus will cross-pollinate, resulting in an increased yield, but with more seeds. Although the tangerine tree withstands freezing well, the fruit does not. Thankfully, many tangerines ripen early, beginning in November, avoiding most winter cold snaps.



'OROBLANCO' & 'MELOGOLD'

Grapefruits

Although sold as grapefruits, 'Oroblanco' and 'Melogold' are technically hybrids between grapefruits and the larger pummelos. Forget what you might have heard about pink grapefruit having the sweetest flavor—'Oroblanco' and 'Melogold' win the sugar taste test hands down. They are simply the sweetest grapefruit varieties you can grow in Tucson, and they have the added benefit of being seedless. If you insist on a pink-fleshed grapefruit, choose 'Rio Red' or 'Ruby Red.'



3 TREES, 1 HOLE

Tempted by the promise of three types of citrus on the same tree, many newcomers plant a 'Fruit Cocktail' citrus tree only to be disappointed when one type of fruit, usually the lemon, becomes dominant and the other varieties become stunted or die back completely. If you have limited space and want variety, consider planting three trees in one hole. This method results in more balanced production between the different types of trees. For best results, choose three trees of similar maturity and vigor, keeping them pruned to a uniform size to prevent one variety from taking over. If you select carefully, you can plan for successive ripening, which means that you spread your harvest out over a longer period rather than having to pick and consume or juice all your citrus within a couple of months. For example, by planting an 'Early Hamlin,' a 'Trovia,' and a 'Washington' navel orange in the same hole, the fruit will ripen successively from October through April.

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ARIZONA SWEET

Oranges

Most Tucson gardeners should choose their oranges from the category known as Arizona Sweets rather than 'Valencias' or navels. These oranges include such popular varieties as 'Early Hamlin,' 'Trovia,' 'Marrs,' 'Diller,' and 'Finespale.' Arizona Sweet oranges peel and juice well, and depending on the variety, bear fruit over a long period (usually November–March). Since most Arizona Sweet varieties bear fruit as early as October, they are not as likely as 'Valencias' to suffer from frostbite.

A WORD ABOUT DWARF CITRUS

Gardening in small spaces calls for smaller trees. Citrus trees grafted onto dwarf rootstocks produce trees that mature anywhere from 25% to 75% smaller than a full-sized tree of the same variety. The smallest trees are those grafted to 'Flying Dragon' rootstock, which produces a mature tree only 4 to 8 feet high and wide. Their miniature size makes dwarf varieties excellent choices for containers.

It's important to keep a couple of points in mind when considering dwarf citrus. First, dwarfing does not reduce the size of the fruit, only the size of the tree. Second, dwarf trees grow more slowly than standard citrus and produce less fruit. If you only plan to live in your home a few years, you may want to select a standard citrus tree that will grow faster and produce more fruit in a shorter time period. ★

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