



Urban Harvest

Growing gardens. Enriching lives.

Citrus is Dee...licious!

Tam Shelby, Busy Bee Nursery

The intoxicating smell of citrus blossoms in March and the sweet juicy fruit starting in November, maybe even October, makes me wonder why more gardeners pass the opportunity to grow citrus. Despite the fact that most, if not all commercial citrus is grown in The Valley, the Upper Gulf Coast area with its heat and humidity offers near ideal conditions for growing.

All forms of citrus will grow and thrive here but none is as adapted as the satsuma. The satsuma, with its origins in East Asia and development mainly in Japan, can be grown here with little care. No need to settle for the generic variety either, as many new varieties are and will continue to become available, mostly through the efforts of backyard citrus enthusiasts.

Names such as, but not limited to: Raspberry Tangor, Miyagawa, Miho, Seto, and Miyauchi Iyo Tangor, while not familiar to the majority of gardeners in this area, are forms of the satsuma with slightly varying flavors and ripening times. They all have the same cultural requirements as those of the older Okitsu variety.

If space is at a premium, with the availability of the Flying Dragon rootstock, citrus can live and produce quite well in a 15-20 gallon container. Shade from deciduous trees need not be a problem—it makes for juicier fruit and less stress on the tree from the intense August heat.

Citrus need to be fertilized once, between March and June with a nitrogen rich fertilizer. Mine get a healthy dose of fishmeal. But don't use nitrogen fertilizers after June because new fall growth can be killed by freezes! Rather, in September, kelp meal is applied to help with cold tolerance.

Later on, after the first light freeze and when all the fruit has been picked, I spray my trees with "Cloud Cover" to decrease the likelihood of freeze damage. I also mound up mulch around the base of the trees to cover the graft union. All my in-ground citrus is on Trifoliolate or Flying Dragon rootstock, although I am experimenting with another rootstock call Swingle-Citrumelo. The trifoliolate rootstocks help the cold tolerance of the citrus by initiating dormancy at 45-50°F.

Seedling citrus seems to have increased cold tolerance but the trees are larger and take longer to come into bearing, usually at 5-7 years of age. Only if it gets really cold, below 25°F, do I break out the frost blankets.

There is only one pest that gives me any concern; the citrus leaf minor. This sole source of concern appears with the flushes of new growth. Neem oil, applied every 10-14 days during this period will keep this disfiguring pest in check. A parasitic wasp to control this pest is being studied. Overall,

planting citrus in the ground or in a container is well worth the effort rewarding you with a beautiful evergreen tree, sweet fragrance and an abundance of deee...licious fruit.

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