



Unusual Gift Plants – Citrus

Looking for an unusual gift plant for your gardening friend? Consider a potted citrus tree to grow as a houseplant and even produce edible fruits.

But if you're curious to try and grow a plant from an orange or lemon pip (seed) for yourself, don't do it. Although the seeds will grow, they will produce a tree too large to be grown as a houseplant; and remember, citrus are not winterhardy in Nebraska so cannot be grown outdoors year-round. Instead choose a natural dwarf or grafted plant developed for pot culture. Plants recommended below will stay a reasonable size and also begin fruit bearing sooner than a plant grown from seed.

Meyer Lemon

One of the best citrus trees to grow as a houseplant is Meyer Lemon, *Citrus x meyeri*. Thought to be a cross between lemon and mandarin orange, it was introduced into the United States by Frank N. Meyer of the USDA, who discovered the plant growing as an ornamental potted plant in Peking, China in 1908.

By the mid 1940s Meyer lemon was widely grown throughout southern California, when it was found to be widely infected with a virus that killed millions of citrus trees throughout the world and rendered others unproductive. Plants in the US were destroyed to save other citrus trees. In the 1950s a virus-free selection was found and released by the University of Florida as *Citrus limon* 'Meyer Improved'.

When sold as a houseplant, 'Meyer Improved' is often grafted onto a dwarfing rootstock, which keeps containerized plants within a mature height of 4-5 feet, although the same plants grown in ground beds in Zone 10 may reach 8-10 feet or more. (Container size restricts root development which has a dwarfing effect on plant growth.)

Plants feature attractive dark green foliage and may have a few thorns on the branches, but will sparkle with fragrant, white flowers. Plants may be ever-bearing, but fruit will be produced most heavily in winter from December to April.

Other Citrus

Here are a few other citrus to consider as well as Meyer Improved lemon.

- **Calamondin orange**, X *Citrofortunella microcarpa* - small bushy evergreen tree or shrub; believed to be a cross between a mandarin orange and kumquat. Grows best in full sun. Produces small bitter-tasting oranges nearly year-round once plants begin blooming.
- **Mandarin orange**, *Citrus reticulata* 'Clementine' - small thorny tree growing well in full or partial sun. Sweet seedless fruits.
- **Ponderosa lemon**, *Citrus* 'Ponderosa' - small thorny tree growing well in full or partial sun. Yellow fruits are bumpy, thick-skinned and although not a true lemon can be used as a lemon substitute. Fruits on indoor plants are about the size of an orange.
- **Navel orange**, *Citrus sinensis* 'Trovita' - small tree with slender spines growing in the leaf axils; grows best in full sun. Produces juicy, sweet oranges with thin, easy to peel skin.

Care

During winter, provide as much sun as possible, preferably full sun with a southern exposure. If necessary provide supplemental light, especially in winter, so that plants receive 8-12 hours of light per day. Normal indoor temperatures are fine, although plants prefer a cool location, down to but not less than 50°F degrees.

Plants can be moved outside during summer months. If repotting is needed, use a general-purpose potting soil.

When watering, whether summer or winter, water plants thoroughly and allow the soil surface to become dry between watering. Provide extra humidity or mist plants daily during winter.

If plants bloom, but fruits don't set, you may need to pollinate the flowers by hand with a child's paintbrush.

Keep an eye out for pests, including mealybug, whitefly and spider mites.

Your Suggestions are Welcome!

Is there a lawn and gardening topic you would like to learn more about? Sarah Browning is an Extension Educator with Nebraska Extension and can be contacted by phone 402 441-7180, by mail at 444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln, NE 68528: or by e-mail sarah.browning@unl.edu.

Images from Pixabay

1. Mandarin orange
2. Ponderosa lemon
3. Calamondin orange



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