

Are citrus trees easy to grow indoors? How do I keep one?

Increasingly, nurseries are offering young citrus trees to indoor gardeners. Catalogs typically offer small four to six-inch pots containing a named variety grafted onto a young seedling. Garden centers may offer larger plants two-feet tall in 3-gallon pots. Often, these are varieties whose fruit is rarely available in supermarkets, including key limes, sour kumquat, calamondin orange, fingered citron (otherwise known as Buddha's hand), and Meyer lemon (my personal favorite).

Keeping citrus indoors is not a new practice. In fact, wealthy estate owners in Great Britain, France and the United States maintained 'orangeries' in the 18th and 19th centuries when citrus was a rare treat. Potted citrus trees would be moved outdoors in the summer and indoors to special glass houses in the winter.

Today, few homeowners have a heated greenhouse in which to keep citrus. Keeping citrus in the home is challenging but not impossible. To begin with, select only trees grafted onto dwarf rootstock. Full-size varieties will quickly become pot-pound and will not bear fruit. Trees should be potted into the largest pot that you can safely move indoors and out – often about five-gallons in size. Use a well-draining potting mix. Large pots may be placed onto durable casters, allowing them to be moved more easily. It is also a good idea to place pots onto a sturdy drip pan upon potting as they will be too heavy to lift later.

In the summer, citrus trees will thrive in a sunny and warm location outdoors. With good fertilization and watering, those small starts will grow from a six-inches to a well-branched bush about 12-18" tall in a single season. To encourage summer growth and flowering, fertilize them with a balanced fertilizer and continue giving them fertilizer until late to midsummer. Be sure to allow them to dry out between watering.

Keeping citrus through the fall and winter is where problems arise. Bring them indoors before the first frost. Like ficus, citrus trees will immediately drop leaves and immature fruit when brought into a low-light environment. Place potted citrus in direct sunlight in a south-facing window. At our latitude, strong supplemental lighting is essential, particularly from mid-November to late February when light levels are low. Due to low humidity during the heating season, trees will dry out quickly and need frequent watering, but do not allow their drip trays to remain filled with water. In the springtime after all danger of frost has passed (typically June 1st), you can safely return your trees outdoors. Allow them to acclimate for a few weeks in part shade before moving them to full sun.

Blooms must be pollinated for the plant to set fruit. In the summer, bees will happily do this for you. In the winter, even if fruit is already on the tree, a second flush of blooms will scent your house with fragrance. Though tedious, winter blooms can be hand-pollinated with a paintbrush. This must be done daily to ensure that the pollen is viable.

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