

Citrus - Planting

Most citrus trees at your local nursery or garden center are sold in containers, few are wrapped in burlap. Containerized citrus trees were either grown in the container, or were field-grown then dug and placed into the container prior to sale. Whether the citrus tree was grown in or transplanted into the container prior to sale, you should look to see if there is a bud union or narrow bulge around the trunk located several inches above the root mass. This union indicates that the variety of citrus tree you are interested in for fruit was grafted onto a Valley adaptable rootstock. Most likely the rootstock is sour orange, and this particular rootstock is used because it provides a root system that is able to grow in our Valley soils and has foot rot resistance. The bulge of the graft union will disappear within a couple of years, but the union itself will remain noticeable as a distinct line of contrast between the bark textures of the lower rootstock and the scion or the upper citrus variety.

Containerized citrus trees are available year around here in the Rio Grande Valley and can be planted anytime. The best results are found with planting in the fall to late winter so the tree can become established before the onset of next summers' hot, dry weather. Many containerized citrus trees are grown in a soilless planting mix that may contain peatmoss. The root system of these trees, even after planting into your soil, tends to remain in the peatmoss medium and not grow out into the surrounding soil, resulting in poor tree establishment and growth. To avoid having the roots grow only within the peatmoss, loosen the roots in the rootball or wash off an inch of peatmoss from the rootball, including the top of the ball, immediately before planting. By exposing the roots, this will allow them to come in contact with your soil to force growth into the surrounding soil. This results in better tree establishment, tree growth and fruit production.

The planting depth of the hole is critical to the survival of your citrus tree. The rootstock is resistant to foot rot disease, but the top is not. If the bud union is too low and comes in contact with your soil, your tree can still contract foot rot and die. To avoid killing your trees due to incorrect planting, remove the lawn grass in a circle 3 to 5 feet in diameter from the center of the planting hole. Dig the hole 1.5 times wider than the root ball, but dig the hole only as deep as the rootball. DO NOT dig it deeper. However, if you choose not to remove your lawn grass then dig the hole an inch less deep. The best way to determine the depth of your hole is to lay a shovel handle across the hole with both ends laying on undisturbed soil or lawn grass. Then measure the depth of the hole starting from the underside of the shovel's handle.

Mix some of your topsoil with moist organic mater such as compost or peatmoss in a 50:50 mixture. Set the tree in the hole and backfill halfway with your soil mixture. Water sufficiently to wet the backfill mixture and to settle the rootball. Complete filling the hole to within 1 inch of the top of the hole with soil mixture and pat with your hands. Do not tramp or stomp the backfill with your feet. Then

cover the soil mixture with 1 inch of your topsoil, not the soil mixture. The topsoil will help prevent rapid drying of the soil mixture and the rootball peatmoss. Lastly, build a watering ring with your remaining topsoil, not the soil mixture, on top of the bare ground around the tree, slightly wider than the planting hole. The ring should be 5 to 6 inches high and 6 to 8 inches thick. Fill the watering basin with water. When the water soaks in, check to see if any holes develop due to the soil mixture settling around the roots. If so, fill the holes with your topsoil.

(Information source: Home Fruit Production - Citrus B-1629, by Julian W. Sauls. Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas A&M University System, Weslaco, Texas).

Article written by the Cameron County Horticulture Education Committee.

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