

Citrus – Watering, Fertilizing, Weed Control, Pruning and Cold Protection

Watering. Newly-planted citrus trees require deep watering two to three times the first week, depending upon soil type, rainfall and time of year. After the first week water one to two times per week for the next four to six weeks. After about a month, apply water when the soil begins to get dry an inch or so down. You can judge this by sticking your finger in the soil. When watering, simply fill the watering ring each time. The watering ring should erode away over time, usually within 4 to 6 months, at which time the tree can be considered established and watered as needed by a soaker hose or sprinkler system.

Fertilizer. DO NOT apply any fertilizer to young, newly-planted trees until the tree begins showing new growth. Then apply fertilizer monthly, with the last application occurring no later than October. Scatter the fertilizer on the ground a foot from the trunk and promptly water it in. Nitrogen is usually the only fertilizer element required in most Valley soils, but additional elements should cause no harm. Consult your Certified Texas Nursery Professional at your local nursery or call the Cameron County Extension agent if you have specific questions about your soil and fertilizer requirements.

Many fertilizers available at nurseries, garden centers and feed stores can vary in the percentage of nitrogen in the bag. Remember, when reading a bag of fertilizer the first number in a series of three numbers is always nitrogen. Thus, a bag with the numbers 13-0-0 means 13% nitrogen, 0% phosphorous and 0% potassium. The following is a general rule regarding quantity to apply: First year during February through October apply 1 cup of 8 to 13% Nitrogen per tree per month. The second year, again during February through October apply 2 cups of 8 to 13% Nitrogen per tree per month. Third year, during February through October, apply 4 cups of 8 to 13% Nitrogen per tree per month. Refer to next weeks article on 'Citrus-Care of established, older trees' for care after the third year.

Weed control. Good weed control is absolutely essential for rapid establishment and vigorous growth of young citrus trees. Eliminate all existing lawn grass and weeds for several feet around your tree. As the spread of the tree's branches increases, widen the grass-free area beyond the canopy edge or the drip-line of the most outer leaves. Weed control can be accomplished by hoeing. Or by chemical means such as herbicides like 'Roundup' and 'Kleenup' which are excellent for control of existing weeds. If nutgrass is a problem use 'Finale' instead of 'Roundup'. Also, a pre-emergent herbicide may be used to prevent weed seeds from germinating. Be sure to read the directions for application when using herbicides. Be sure to apply on a windless day so none of the spray comes in contact with the tree's foliage or trunk. These herbicides can kill a young tree. **Organic mulches are NOT** recommended for citrus trees because of the potential for introducing foot rot disease. If you insist on using a mulch, keep the mulch 12 inches or more away from the trunk of the tree.

Pruning or Training. Citrus trees are sold already properly shaped and pruned to develop naturally, so pruning and training of a citrus tree is not necessary. The only exception is when a branch is broken during the planting process. Also, if you should ever notice new growth on the trunk, or emerging from the below the graft union, prune these off immediately.

Cold protection. Several kinds of wraps are used on the trunk of young citrus in the belief that they will provide cold or freeze protection. With the exception of soil none of these wraps provide more than a few degrees of protection to the tree trunk. Wraps do provide protection from rodent damage, but wraps can harbor insects, particularly ants, which can cause problems. The **best cold protection** for young citrus is a bank of soil mounded up onto the trunk. This form of protection for a young tree should not be used after the first two to four winters. A bank of soil should be put up no earlier than Thanksgiving and taken down no later than the end February. A bank of soil is a mound of soil piled as high as feasible around the trunk, but lower than the branches. Although the branches will be killed in severe freeze they will come back from the trunk protected by the soil.

(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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