

Citrus - Care of established, mature trees.

Cultural practices for established mature citrus trees are designed to maintain good growth and vigor, and to maximize the production of quality fruit. The important components are watering, fertilization, and weed control. Cold and freeze protection for mature citrus trees will be a separate article published in November.

Watering. A good irrigation schedule for mature trees is to water when the soil is dry. A good way to determine when to water is with the use of an evaporation gauge. A simple, reliable gauge can be made using a pet food or tuna fish can that is at least 2 inches deep. Set the cans in the middle of the yard so they are exposed to the wind, rain and sun, but be sure to cover them with a wire mesh so animals and birds do not drink from them. Fill the can with water immediately after you have irrigated your citrus tree. Assuming the cans hold 2 inches of water, and it is not spilled during lawn mowing, you will need to water your citrus when the can is completely dry. From mid-April through mid-September, water your citrus with 1-1/2 inches of water every time the 2 inches of water evaporates from the can. The rest of the year, apply 1 inch of water when the can is dry. Remember, always refill your can after you water your citrus and wait for the water to evaporate again before you water your trees. Remember less water is needed in the cooler months because your tree grows only half as much and uses only 3/4 as much water. When applying water to sandy or clay soils adjust the rate of application so you provide even watering and to prevent runoff.

Fertilization. Valley soils are generally very fertile and contain more than adequate quantities of all essential elements except nitrogen. Other elements rarely need to be applied to mature, established citrus. However some exceptions do exist. Clay soils contain plenty of iron, but citrus trees may exhibit iron deficiency in the early spring. Usually the deficiency clears up when the soil warms up. If it does not, apply iron chelates to your soil. Where iron deficiency does occur, do not apply fertilizers containing phosphorus because high phosphorous aggravates iron and zinc deficiency in high pH Valley soils. Red, sandy soil may need supplemental potassium and sandy soils may need supplemental zinc. However, it is best to discuss soil nutrition with your Cameron County Extension Agent or your Certified Texas Nursery Professional. Mature, citrus trees bearing fruit should receive enough nitrogen to provide good growth but not excessive growth. Apply 15% nitrogen at 1 pound per inch of trunk diameter. One pound of fertilizer is about two cups. The fertilizer can be applied all at one time in February, or split into two or three applications. Two applications are recommended with 2/3 of the fertilizer applied in February and 1/3 in May. Spread the fertilizer over the bare ground, around your tree, and water it in.

Weed and Grass Control. Control weeds and grass beneath citrus trees to reduce competition for fertilizer and water. Also, weeds and grass may harbor pests which can affect the fruit and or tree. It is easier to control weeds or grass by having bare soil, than to mow under citrus trees which may damage the tree's bark. Mulches are not recommended because of the incidence of foot rot disease. If a mulch is used keep it 1 foot or more from the trunk of the tree.

Pruning. Citrus trees are pruned primarily to control tree size and to remove dead, diseased or damaged branches. Otherwise citrus trees should be allowed to grow naturally without pruning.

Pest Control. Citrus problems in the Valley include, insects, mites and diseases. It is best to monitor the condition of your citrus trees on a regular basis to control outbreaks of diseases and insects which will affect the vigor and reduce fruit production. Aphids, mites, scales and whiteflies are good examples of some insect pests. Where pest control is necessary or desirable, contract your Cameron County Extension Agent or your Certified Texas Nursery Professional for confirmation of the problem and recommendation. When using any pesticide, read and follow all the directions.

(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
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