



Citrus - Citron

Citrus medica L.

Rutaceae

Species description

Citron is a slow growing shrub or small tree with irregular straggling branches and twigs, and long spines on the leaf axils. The leaflets are green, ovate, leathery, and lemon-scented, with wingless or nearly wingless petioles. The fragrant white-pink to white-purple, mostly perfect flowers appear in short clusters. Citron fruit has an irregular, aromatic, thick rind. Fruit shape is highly variable: oblong or oval, and occasionally pear-shaped or hand-shaped as in the “Bhudda’s Hand” variety (*Citrus medica* var. *sarcodactylis*). Citron fruit peels are yellow at maturity, smooth to rough and bumpy in texture. The pulp is pale yellow or greenish with many dry, firm segments that may taste acidic or sweet, and contain numerous seeds. Citron can grow 20-30 feet in height, with a canopy 18-30 feet wide, and trees may live for 50+ yrs. Citron trees are highly sensitive to frost and should be well protected if cold temperatures are expected.



Natural and cultural history

Citron trees grow naturally in the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains. Citrus were historically cultivated in Southeast Asia for at least the last 4,000 years. The fruit were introduced to North Africa, and spread to Europe in the Middle Ages. Citron seeds were found in archaeological excavations in Mesopotamia, and were cultivated by the Medes in present-day Iran. Introduced to Mediterranean Europe by Alexander the Great in 300 BCE, citron became a staple and commercial food in Rome. The Spanish introduced citron to the New World during their early conquests. Commercial production of citron began in California in 1880, but trees suffered frost damage. Citron are now primarily cultivated on the coastal mainland and islands of the Mediterranean region.

Planting considerations and propagation techniques

Most citrus trees prefer a warm location in full sun with air circulation and drainage. Citrus trees are very spiny so care should be taken in their placement, especially in public spaces. Citrus flowers are self-fertile and require no cross-pollination, though honeybees are effective at pollinating flowers. In general, citrus trees can grow on a wide range of soil types, from sand to loam to heavy clay as long as they are well drained. Citrus trees do best with a soil pH of 6-6.5, though different rootstocks prefer different soil types. Citron trees are frost sensitive, so take care to place them in a protected location. They may be readily propagated by taking cuttings from 2-4 year-old-wood and burying them in moist, deep soil without defoliation.

Citron cuttings may be budded onto rough lemon, grapefruit, sour orange or sweet orange rootstock, though the fruit will be smaller.

Water needs

Citrus need about 4-6 inches of water per month in the summer; they are generally not drought tolerant and need careful attention to produce well-developed fruit.

Care

Citrus trees should be trained to a suitable shape with an open center. There are three primary pruning objectives: increase total leaf area, improve airflow through the canopy, and increase light to the branches. Proper training keeps trees the correct size for ease of care and harvest.

Citrus are prone to many diseases and pests. We recommend consulting a Cooperative Extension citrus specialist.

(See Yuma Cooperative Extension, <https://extension.arizona.edu/yuma>; and <https://extension.arizona.edu/sites/extension.arizona.edu/files/pubs/az1492.pdf>).

Harvesting and processing

Citrus should be harvested when the fruit has full color or flavor and when it can be eaten immediately. Citron fruits may be eaten fresh or cooked into preserves or desserts. The entire fruit can be made into marmalade, jelly, and fruit bars. Citron juice is used as a flavoring. Citron peel is often candied, and the preserve has a place in the international market for use in baked goods and candy. To candy the peels, cut the fruit in half and scrape out the pulp. The peels are then immersed in salt water to ferment for six weeks, with brine changes every two weeks. After boiling in water to soften, the peels are boiled in sugar to produce the candy. The candied peel is sun-dried or canned.

References and resources

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