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The easiest citrus tree to grow is dwarf calamondin. Use the sour fruit to flavour drinks or for marmalade.

INDOOR GROWING

Yes, Canadians can grow citrus fruit—indoors. Here's how.

BY JOCELYN LAURENCE

A touch of the TROPICS

IF YOU'VE VISITED SUN-SOAKED COUNTRIES, you've likely fallen in love with the scented blossoms and glistening fruit of orange, lemon and lime trees. Whether growing in orchards, by the side of the road or in pots as elegant accents for a terrace or balcony, citrus trees offer a visual and sensual burst of colour and fragrance, the dark green leaves serving as a backdrop for the bright white flowers and the glowing hues of the fruit.

DID YOU KNOW?

Don't go to seed.

Steve Leroux of Green Barn Nursery in Montreal says it takes at least 30 years to produce fruit on a tree grown from seed, and sometimes seed-grown plants never produce fruit.

Back home, you might find yourself yearning to breathe in that haunting perfume and to savour the sight, not to mention the taste, of the plump fruit. Canada isn't exactly famous for its year-round warm temperatures, though in certain blessed parts of B.C., citrus trees flourish in the ground with minimal frost protection. But don't lose heart. You can create an indoor/outdoor tropical paradise no matter what zone you call home—and enjoy the fruits of your labours.

ORANGES

The easiest oranges—indeed, one of the most fail-safe citrus trees—to grow are calamondins (*Citrofortunella microcarpa* syn. *Citrus microcarpa*), dwarf hybrids that have been popular for years as an indoor/outdoor plant. A cross between mandarins (*Citrus reticulata* var. *unshiu*) and kumquats (*Fortunella japonica*), each orange is about the size of a Ping-Pong ball. Its juice is sour, so treat it like a lime and use it to flavour drinks, season dishes or make marmalade. As Steve Leroux, co-owner of Montreal-based Green Barn Nursery, says, "If you kill a calamondin, you should stop buying plants!"

LEMONS

Perhaps the best-known lemon is the low-maintenance Meyer (*Citrus × meyeri*), but 'Eureka' (*C. limon* 'Eureka') and 'Ponderosa' (*C. 'Ponderosa'*) are equally reliable. Meyers can handle an indoor temperature of 10°C, so if you turn down your furnace at night, they won't complain. 'Ponderosa' produces huge lemons year-round, while 'Eureka' also comes in a variegated version (*C. l. 'Eureka Variegata'*): the skin is an eye-catching mix of green and yellow stripes, with a flesh that's blush pink.

LIMES

Key limes (*Citrus aurantiifolia*) are a good choice, since the fruit ripens in stages, providing a regular supply. The limes appear in clusters of about six, but thin them to two or three so each one can grow to about the size of a billiard ball. Leroux calls them "party trees," because your guests have the thrill of picking a fresh lime, slicing off a segment and popping it in their drink. He also recommends kaffir limes (*C. hystrix*). They're noted for the heavenly fragrance wafting from both fruit and leaves, but it's the leaves, not the small, rough-skinned fruit, that are a major ingredient in southeast Asian and Thai cooking. "The fruit," says Leroux, "is the leaves."

How much fruit each tree produces depends on its age and size. Younger trees can produce less fruit, and some citrus trees are more prolific than others. Calamondins, for instance, provide lots of fruit year-round, while 'Eureka' and Meyer lemons and most limes are known for their bounty. Most trees go through a period of semi-hibernation in the winter, though, and produce less during that time.

PRIMER

Beginner basics: how to have a fruitful paradise**N°1****Give plenty of light**

Citrus trees need warmth and light, including at least four hours of direct sun a day. Position your tree in front of a south- or west-facing window during the cold weather (check the window for drafts; citrus trees hate to be chilly). Once it's above freezing—a minimum of 8°C—put your tree in the sunniest outdoor spot possible.

N°2**Provide humidity**

You may not like humidity, but citrus loves it, especially during the winter, when central heating dries out everything, including our skin and our plants. Daily misting is a must. You can also put out bowls of water, use a humidifier or cool-mist vapourizer, or put the tree in a tray filled with pebbles, then pour in water to the top of the pebble layer, and replenish the water as needed.

N°3**Choose containers & soil**

You'll need a planter about 30 inches (75 cm) deep and wide for a mature tree. Use a 12-inch (30-cm) pot if you want a smaller tree. When the tree has clearly filled the pot, take it out (in winter or when it's not flowering or fruiting) and cut off one to two inches (2.5 to 5 cm) around the edges of the root ball. Put it back in the pot with fresh compost and let it rest for a month in a fairly cool, part-sun location to allow the root system to regrow.

Citrus trees don't seem to mind being slightly root-bound, but they're also susceptible to root rot. John Netland of Urban Oasis Gardens in Toronto says drainage is key, starting with lots of holes in the bottom of the container. To make sure the roots have good drainage, put the pot on feet, bricks or (best bet) a plant trolley, which is hugely helpful when you move your tree.

Fill the container with a mixture of gravel, potting soil and organic compost—but not peat moss. "Companies mine peat bogs

for an inexpensive growing medium, but in doing that, they're destroying a millennia-old, irreplaceable ecosystem," Netland says. "Peat doesn't offer plants much nutrition and it also acts like a sponge. As it dries, it wicks the water away from the plant's roots, which can become dehydrated quite quickly."

N°4**Water wisely**

Steve Leroux of Green Barn Nursery in Montreal says watering is the only slightly tricky part of growing citrus trees—they won't tolerate overwatering. Moist to dryish—not soggy soil—is best. Moderation is key, although when plants are in bloom or fruiting, they need extra water. When they're outside, Leroux recommends checking the soil daily. When the trees are semi-dormant indoors, watering every seven to 10 days usually does the trick, but still check the moisture level first. Check the soil at root level as well as at the top. Definitely don't let the soil dry out completely or the leaves will almost certainly fall off. A terracotta container gives your citrus tree an attractive Mediterranean look, but Netland cautions that terracotta allows for more water evaporation than plastic unless the outside of the pot is glazed. Be vigilant.

N°5**Feed regularly**

Leroux recommends feeding three or four times a year. Use a balanced, slow-release organic fertilizer or a complete citrus food to help fruit production. At other times, give your tree liquid kelp or fish fertilizer. If yellow leaves appear, you might need a magnesium, iron and zinc supplement, since citrus trees often lack those minerals.

N°6**Relocate in summer**

Slow and steady wins the race here. When there's no chance of frost and the temperature is at least 8°C, move your citrus tree outside and put it in a slightly shaded, sheltered spot. After two to three weeks, move it into full sun. Follow the same routine when

taking it indoors: a few weeks in an outdoor, shady (but light-filled) location before taking it inside. Keep a keen eye on temperatures during these transitional stages.

Leroux says most citrus plants can survive 0°C—briefly. He and Netland agree that citrus trees are hardier than we might imagine. A few years ago, Leroux took delivery of 3,000 citrus trees in mid-May and parked them in an outdoor lot in Montreal. That evening, there was a freak snowstorm, but virtually all the trees survived.

N°7**Pollination? No problem**

It seems like a miracle that citrus trees continue to bear fruit through self-pollination, but it's true, according to Leroux. After 30-plus years of growing citrus, he says he's never encountered a tree that isn't self-pollinating, even if it remains indoors.

N°8**Pruning? Only occasionally**

Potted citrus plants rarely need pruning. If they get a bit leggy, snip off branch tips in the spring. However, the flowers and fruit grow on old wood, so the more you prune, the fewer fruit you'll have next season.

N°9**Watch for pests**

The most common citrus pests are spider mites, whiteflies, scale and aphids. Use an organic soap spray or horticultural oil, or, as Netland suggests, having battled a major infestation of spider mites, make a mixture of one part rubbing alcohol to three parts water. Leroux's recipe calls for a 50/50 mix of vodka and water, but the aim is the same. Spraying against pests is important when the trees come in from the outdoors, and don't neglect the undersides of the leaves. "Spraying the plant only from above is an easy mistake to make," Netland says.

Netland nicely sums up the whole process: "My best advice is to learn what makes specific plants happy. I love the exchange of information between the plant and the gardener."

FOR SOURCES, SEE PAGE 77.