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Home Grounds, Gardens, Home Pests

'Tis the Season for Citrus

Late Fall to early winter is when we are harvesting citrus in Central Alabama and growing it in your own backyard has been growing in popularity the last few years. Citrus has been grown in Central and South Alabama for years. The citrus belt spans from California along the Gulf Coast to Florida (USDA Zones 8-10). With their evergreen foliage, fragrant flowers and delicious fruit, citrus can be a great addition to every garden or patio. And as an added bonus, with the exception of a few tangerine varieties, all citrus is self-fruitful meaning you can have just one plant to produce fruit.

With very few insect and diseases, the only drawback to citrus is the occasional cold winter temperatures where they will require protection. It is best to plant citrus in a large container so it can be moved indoors or just in the garage overnight during cold spells. For central Alabama, I recommend the Semi-hardy to hardy varieties. Semi-Hardy refers to citrus varieties that are hardy to temps in the mid to upper teens or low 20's. Satsumas or mandarins, kumquats and Meyer lemons are all considered semi-hardy in central Alabama.

The highest degree of success and greatest satisfaction in growing citrus in Alabama is often seen with satsumas. They withstand colder temperatures than the other forms of edible sweet citrus, produce more consistent crops over a longer period of time, and require less cold protection.

Satsuma is a mandarin. It has excellent cold hardiness and ripens its fruit well ahead of most freeze problems (September to November). Owari is the most popular variety and is generally available at retail outlets. Brown's Select is a very recent introduction from Louisiana that is somewhat similar to Owari in tree and fruit characteristics, but ripens its fruit at least 2 to 3 weeks earlier. Armstrong Early (also called Early Armstrong) is an old variety that has been grown for many years and is planted to a small degree. Fruit of this variety ripen extremely early (beginning in September), but the quality is not as good as Owari. When grown under warmer climatic conditions (such as Florida), fruits often retain their peak quality for

approximately 2 to 4 weeks, after which they may become puffy and rough in appearance and lose flavor and juice content. However, under the cooler climatic conditions of Central and South Alabama, fruits tend to remain in good condition on the tree, retaining their juice and flavor for 1 to 2 months after reaching full maturity.

There are a number of hardy acid-type fruits available for homeowner use. These plants make attractive ornamental specimens and provide delightful fruits as well. The kumquat tree (not the fruit) is the most cold hardy of the commonly grown acid citrus fruits (it can withstand temperatures of 15 to 17 degrees F). The kumquat is one of the most widely used citrus plants around the home; it develops into an attractive shrublike tree that bears small orangelike fruit about 1 inch in diameter. Fruits can be eaten fresh, peel and all, or used in making jellies, marmalade, or candies. Several varieties are available, but only three are commonly propagated: Nagami, Marumi, and Meiwa. Meiwa, which produces round, sweet fruit, has become one of the most popular for home plantings.

Meyer is the most cold hardy variety of lemon. The fruit ripening period usually lasts for several months beginning in late summer. Good crops of large, practically seedless, juicy lemons are produced. Ponderosa, is another variety of lemon that is commonly grown in Florida that produces exceedingly large fruits and can also be grown as a container plant.

Limes are among the most cold-sensitive of the common acid-type citrus fruits. However, the Mexican (also called Key or West Indian) lime, famous for the Key lime pie, can be grown as a container plant when provided with inside protection during the winter.

As mentioned previously, citrus fruits can be grown successfully in the home grounds with little or no control of insects and diseases. Fruits produced without pesticide sprays may be very poor in external quality as a result of damage by several mites, insects, and fungal diseases. Although they may look unattractive on the outside, external damage usually has no detrimental effect on internal fruit quality. And the appearance of the tree may suffer, but seldom will trees be critically damaged by most citrus pests.

So, if you are looking for a low maintenance, conversation piece, think about adding citrus plants to your landscape or patio. Not only will you love their incredible fragrance when in bloom, but it's so much fun to watch them grow and share with your neighbors, friends and family.