

Sweet on Citrus Gardening

Sep 12, 2016 | [Current Issue](#), [Sept/Oct 16](#), [Sustainable Gardening](#) |

AN ELEGANT FORM OF EDIBLE LANDSCAPING

BY JOSIE SEELIGSON



A few years ago I planted a small Satsuma orange tree in our backyard. Lovely evergreen leaves unfolded barren for a season or so, until finally, late one spring, delicate white flowers fragrantly blossomed near the back porch. That summer, round green balls appeared on its branches like Christmas tree ornaments, showing promise to grow into larger spheres of juicy orange segments

— or so I imagined. Until one day I walked into our kitchen, and my husband proudly pointed to a bowl on the table, saying, “Look! Our lime tree made a bunch of limes, and I picked them for us!”

Citrus trees can be an elegant form of edible landscaping. As evergreens, most citrus keep a good face throughout the year, and in good years grace their keeper with gifts of grapefruit, oranges, lemons, limes, mandarins, tangerines, tangelos, pummelos, kumquats, citron or calamondin. Oils in the colorful reptilian peels create pleasing aromas and add flavor to sweet or tart inner flesh. Citrus is ready to harvest between October and May, during cooler months when many regional fruits don’t naturally grow.

Most citrus are picked ripe and ready to eat. Unlike tomatoes, peaches or bananas, you can’t pick or buy them green and allow them to ripen on your countertop; they must ripen on the tree. Even commercial growers must hand-pick citrus fruit in waves, as different fruits ripen to their correct colors and are then promptly ready to consume.

Harvests can sometimes be overabundant and shelf life limited, so citrus tree keepers are known to bring bulging bags of limes to party hosts, trade for vegetables with gardening friends, regularly create refreshing cocktails, marinades, salads and even pasta sauces, sponsor neighborhood kids’ lemonade stands and invite others to please come pick away. One friend with a huge bounty once placed a basket on her front porch with a sign: “Free lemons!”

Citrus can also be fragile and temperamental divas. They want the sunny side of the yard, prefer a side structure for shelter, and during freezes must be covered or brought inside. For this reason, most commercial Texas groves take root in the Rio Grande Valley, where the sun shines relentlessly and winters pass mildly. During cool-weather holidays, many people near the Rio Grande Valley give bushels of grapefruit or oranges as gifts, since they are readily available and inexpensive.

But Texans are not alone; Europeans have traditionally gifted citrus since the Middle Ages. During cold winter months when fresh fruit was difficult and expensive to acquire, only the richest people regularly ate it. A piece of citrus therefore was a special gift, saved up for and

treasured for flavor and vitamins. And once people realized that baking fruit into a cake doused with alcohol could preserve it, the mighty Christmas fruitcake was born.

Spaniards first planted citrus in Texas during the 1700s, and by the 1900s Texas boasted thousands of trees, including grapefruit, lime, lemon, and orange, and exported 500 carloads a year. During the 1930s Depression years, citrus marketers had to turn surplus oranges into juice, frozen concentrate and powders. Citrus farms survived, and many new citrus varieties were developed and patented. Today the state fruit of Texas is the Red Grapefruit.

Along with the Red Grapefruit varieties, many other great selections for Texas gardeners abound, including the Texas Superstar® Satsuma mandarins, Meyer or Ponderosa lemons, Mexican or Persian limes and Meiwa kumquats. Fanick's nursery off W.W. White Road offers great local wisdom and wide citrus selection (www.fanicknursery.com).

SANDBAR'S KEY LIME PIE



Crust:

2 1/2 sleeves graham crackers
3 tablespoons sugar
1/4 cup (or 1/2 stick) cold unsalted butter

Filling:

2 cans sweetened condensed milk
1 cup Key lime juice or lime juice
7 eggs
Zest of 3 limes

Chantilly Cream:

1 cup heavy whipping cream
1 teaspoon sugar, or less, to taste
1 tablespoon Key lime juice or lime juice
Lime zest, to taste, divided use

For crust: Heat oven to 350 degrees. In a food processor, process graham crackers, sugar and butter. Test to see if the mixture sticks. If not, add a little more butter, but not too much or the crust will become greasy. Press into 18-by-12-inch pan, or half sheet pan, and bake about 8 minutes. Reduce heat to 320 degrees.

For filling: Mix together sweetened condensed milk, Key lime juice, eggs and zest in stainless steel bowl with a stick blender or mixer. Pour filling on top of crust, either hot or cold, and bake at 320 degrees for 10 minutes at the most. Bake until a slight shimmer forms on top of tart. Center should still have some jiggle. If skin forms, it is overdone and should be removed immediately. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour to let filling set.

For Chantilly Cream: Whip cream, sugar, lime juice and zest until mixture thickens.

To serve: cut into slices, set on plate and top each slice with Chantilly Cream and additional lime zest to taste.

Per serving (based on 16): 360 calories (39.8 percent calories from fat), 16 g fat, 135 mg cholesterol, 180 mg sodium, 47 g carbohydrates, 1 g dietary fiber, 8 g protein.

From Andrew Weissman

My aunt once bought a home with a citrus tree collection in place along its side yards and inner courtyard; nestled among other shrubs, vines and trees, the citrus trees were a wonderful selling point of interest. As I wandered through the side yard admiring the lemon, grapefruit and lime trees, one tree in particular caught my eye, bearing fruits that resembled claw-like blobs with grapefruit skin. Alarmed this tree might host a citrus disease, I called horticulturalist David Rodriguez at Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Agency (<http://bexar-tx.tamu.edu>) and described the odd fruit. I didn't get very far before he gently laughed and finished the description of "Budhha's Hand," an exotic citrus used in Asian dishes, but grown in Texas mainly for ornamental interest. For successful citrus growing, plant them outside in early spring after danger of frost has passed. Citrus want full exposure, with 8-10 hours of sun. They do well in pots (and make great potted-plant gifts), which can be taken inside during freezes. If they do freeze, they can re-grow after being cut back. Use well-drained potting soil and feed monthly with a water-soluble fertilizer. Citrus flowers have both male and female parts so they pollinate themselves, and single citrus trees make lovely accent trees in a planted garden.

To fully celebrate citrus, don't miss the Texas Citrus Fiesta in the Rio Grande Valley town of Mission the last weekend of January. "Part folk art, part pageantry," the festival features a carnival, fun run, vaquero cook-off and Parade of Oranges replete with King Citrus, Queen Citrianna and Princess Grapefruit Blossom.

For more information on Texas citrus, visit www.texasweet.com