

Gardening Articles for week ending 21<sup>st</sup> March 2015

Written by Wally Richards.

## CITRUS MAINTENANCE

Citrus is the most popular fruit tree family that gardeners grow in NZ.

In days goneby, on our quarter acre bit of heaven, there would just about always be a lemon tree which was a must for winter colds and sore throats. Likely a grapefruit tree also for breakfast fruit and to make marmalade. For some gardeners the range would extend into oranges and tangelos/mandarins.

In recent times people have started growing their own Lime trees in containers or in warmer areas in the open ground.

As a youngster I would visit my uncle Jack; a second World War returned service man who had been a Desert Rat fighting Rommell. My uncle had an excellent citrus grove of mature trees and likely every variety available in those times. The remarkable thing about his grove was that every tree he had grown from pips.

Most citrus trees once established will bear a main crop each year but have cycles of lessor crops as well, which means that you could have fruit to pick all year round.

One thing that annoys me is the waste from mature trees in gardens, producing so much fruit that the owners cant use and even with giving away to friends, fruit falls and rots while we pay so many dollars a kilo at a green grocers.

I had another example of this recently; a reader from the South Island had been to a Wedding in Tauranga and on the way back in their camper van they stopped off to met me.

They asked if we liked avocados which the answer was yes. They had a box full on board of nice big fruit and gave us a bag full. They told me that there is so many avocado trees growing in peoples gardens that fruit fell to the ground and were run over or mowed.

Here we are paying a few dollars for 3 much smaller avocados which likely are rejects because of their size.

Anyway back to our citrus trees. Feeding citrus, dont waste your money on citrus tree fertiliser or as often called fruit tree fertiliser, it does more harm than good and is only a fast food anyway.

Instead go back to the old sustainable way of feeding your citrus with a good dose of blood & bone in the spring and again in autumn.

If you have chook manure spread that also from trunk to drip line, if no chook manure either use sheep manure pellets or Yates Dynamic Lifter.

The blood & bone etc should be covered with a good compost that has NOT been made from green

waste. (Ask, if the bag doesn't say and if in doubt leave)

Every month from bud/flower time till harvest sprinkle a little Fruit & Flower Power under the tree.

This is magnesium and potash in balance and very important to obtain nice green foliage and juicy fruit with good flavour. If you have a citrus that has dry fruit then you must apply Fruit & Flower Power regularly to put it right.

A question often asked is it correct to remove the flowers on a new citrus tree?

The reason for this is to encourage general growth rather than a few fruit early in the tree's life so larger crops will be available quicker.

Most citrus trees are grafted onto root stock to help overcome wet feet problems and give fruit quicker as the grafted material is mature wood.. The exception to this is Meyer Lemons which are often cutting grown and hence cheaper to buy than grafted.

If you have a grafted tree you can distinctly see the graft just a few inches above the soil line.

The root stock used to be from a unproductive but hardy type called Bitter Orange and as far as I am aware it is still used. It has very thorny branches and small bitter fruit. Sometimes a new growth will develop on the root stock and when this happens it must be cut off.

These growths will grow straight up very quickly and in some cases when left on the graft will be choked off and die losing you your tree.

There is only one sensible way to prune a citrus tree and that is by total removal of branches off the trunk to open up the tree. Cutting the ends off branches allows for new branches to develop on the branch making for a denser tree more prone to disease and pests.

If you have a tree that you have to cut the end off a branch rather than the whole branch then later when the side branches develop you can cut them off at source. That will keep it under control.

If you have a tree that is spindly and would benefit from more branches then simply nip a couple of centimeters off the end of the few branches to encourage more branching.

Citrus trees can be plagued by several pests the worst of these being whitefly.

Other pests include mites, trips, mealy bugs, scale and guava moth grubs.

The very simple way to control all these pests is to sprinkle Neem Tree Granules under the tree from trunk to drip line. I have received this tip from several gardeners who have reported that it takes about 6 weeks or so to rid the tree of pests. So simple and no harm to bees and beneficial insects such as the bright green ladybird that loves to hunt in citrus.

Dependent what the problem pests are and possible re-infestation, likely a 6 monthly application of Neem Tree Granules along with your feed program would be ideal. Additional application if required to clean the tree. This will also take care of borer.

Black sooty mould on your citrus tree indicates an insect problem and to clean off the black stuff spray the tree with Karbyon, leave for 2 days then hose off. Thick layers may require additional treatment.

If you don't remove the mould the tree loses potential energy from the sun as the covered leaves cannot photosynthesize.

There are a few diseases that can affect citrus and in the main these can be prevented or controlled with Liquid Copper and Raingard sprays. It is good gardening practice to spray Liquid Copper and Raingard twice a year as a preventive, doing it in spring and autumn.

Wet feet is the biggest killer of citrus trees and they must always be planted in very free draining soil or higher than the soil level by planting on a mound. The upper root system will then be out of ponding water.

Going into winter you can fortify your citrus trees against wet feet by spraying with Perkfection Supa.

Right now is an excellent time to feed, treat for insect pests and spray your citrus trees.

If you want to plant a new citrus tree, buy now but hold off planting till we get a bit more of the autumn rains.

Ever wondered that when you prepare a bed and plant up seedlings which establish good, but when the bed dries down the seedlings wilt but small young weeds are fine?

That's because seed grown get deep roots quickly and don't wilt when the top soil dries.