

If life gives you a lemon tree

LIFESTYLE/HOME-GARDEN/GARDEN (/LIFESTYLE/HOME-GARDEN/GARDEN) / 30 June 2011 at 12:32pm

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Lemon trees are wonderfully versatile plants for winter kitchen gardens and their yellow fruits bring superb colour in June.

During the Anglo-Boer War, lemon trees were planted along pavements in Kimberley's suburbs and an initiative to plant fruit trees in Soweto before the World Cup has brought a revival in the planting of citrus in gardens.

The Cape rough-skin lemon was brought to South Africa from the islands of St Helena four centuries ago and is the sweetest and best-known lemon tree variety. In more recent years, however, Eureka, a smooth-skinned variety, has become a best-seller.

Citrus trees are indigenous to the hot, dry Mediterranean region. As such, they do best in Gauteng when planted beside north- or west-facing walls where the microclimates are dry and very hot.

Lemon trees are easy to grow, both in the garden or in a large container. The Eureka does well in Joburg, provided you follow the guidelines below.

Position

Lemon trees tolerate mild frost only. If you have a frost-prone garden, plant them beside a north- or west-facing wall. The wall protects the tree and at night it reflects heat from the sun. A lemon tree can also be grown in a container in a sunny spot in a protected courtyard.

Plant it right

Lemons thrive in a compost-enriched soil that drains well. Add bonemeal to the soil before planting – it encourages healthy root growth. A tip from experienced gardeners is to add a few lumps of crushed charcoal to the hole when planting to "sweeten the soil".

Water regularly

Lemon trees need regular watering throughout the year, particularly once the flowers appear in late summer. Water deeply about three times a week. Avoid overwatering.

Feed your tree

Apply a balanced fertiliser high in nitrogen and potassium three times a year (July, December and March). New plants require about 1kg of fertiliser every year. That means about 350g for every application. Gradually increase this to 7.5kg a year for a fully-grown tree. In addition, give the tree 75g of Epsom salts (magnesium sulphate) three times a year. Spread a thick layer of mulch on the roots, but keep it away from the trunk.

Psylla

Look out for infestations of psylla, which can reduce leaf cover on citrus trees. Psylla is an insect that lives in the undersides of tender leaves causing sunken pits and swelling on the upper leaves. To reduce infestation, spray the under leaves with Dursban (5ml to 5 litres).

Best recipes

If you are mad about growing your own lemons, there are two recipes that you need to keep on hand:

* Perk up an old tree: dose an ailing lemon tree with the following pick-me-up: 1kg fruit and flower granular fertiliser, 1kg magnesium sulphate (Epsom salts), 500g urea, 500g potassium sulphate, 1tbsp manganese sulphate, 1tbsp zinc oxide.

* Make lemonade squash: You will need: 8 lemons, 250ml water and one and a half cups of sugar. Grate two lemons finely and keep the grated rind. Squeeze the rest of the lemons, as well as the grated ones, to remove the juice. Put the juice, the water, the sugar and the grated rind in a large pot and mix over a medium heat until dissolved. Do not boil. Let the cordial cool and pour into sterilised bottles. Dilute with water. Double or triple the recipe to make more. - Saturday Star

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