Gardener's Corner, Feb. 2021

By Cate White, San Joaquin County Master Gardener

Many of us have citrus trees in our yards and enjoy their winter fruit. A number of varieties grow well here. Check the Sunset Western Garden book for varieties that do well in our climate zone, (Sunset zone 14).

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Citrus trees require adequate water. Younger trees need more than established ones. Water needs are highest during the active growing season, starting in late winter to early spring, and when conditions are hot and windy. Tree roots are in the top two feet of soil, extending out beyond the drip line, so as the tree grows watering should be done farther out from the trunk. In our area, trees may need water every few days June through September. Fertilize with nitrogen starting in late winter, again in May and if necessary again in June. Avoid fertilizing late in the season, which can adversely affect fruit quality. Iron, zinc and manganese are other elements that may be needed, as indicated by yellowing leaves. A foliar spray of liquid micronutrients may be helpful, or apply in sulfated form to the soil. This condition is most common in winter, since it is harder for the tree to access nutrients in cold damp soil, so it may correct itself in the spring. A good layer of organic mulch on top of the soil is also helpful.

Freezing temperatures in winter can cause to damage citrus trees. The length of freezing is also important, with longer exposure being more harmful. Young trees are more susceptible than those that are established, and may need some protection. If your tree does suffer frost damage, wait to cut it back until spring, since it is hard to be sure the wood is dead until then.

Citrus can be subject to a number of pests. Following are two you may encounter. One is common but relatively minor, and the other is more rare, but can be catastrophic.

Citrus Leaf Miner
Photo courtesy UCANR

First, the Citrus Leaf Miner. These are moth larva which tunnel into new citrus leaves, primarily in the spring and fall. Only new young leaves will be attacked, which can become twisted and deformed. Mature trees withstand the damage well, and even young trees will recover. Do not cut out the damaged leaves, as they are still able to produce energy for the tree. In our area, the summer heat discourages these pests, reducing their activity. Prune away water sprouts and suckers and do not fertilize in the fall. Avoid using insecticides since they cannot reach the larva inside the leaves and may kill off natural predators, leading to a build-up of other pests such as white flies and scale insects.

Second, the Asian Citrus Psyllid. This small insect and its nymphs feed on citrus growth causing dieback of new shoots and twisting or notching of the leaves. Most importantly, they can carry

a fatal disease called Huanglongbing (HLB), or citrus greening disease. The insect and the disease arrived here from Asia in the early 2000's and have been spreading across citrus growing states.

Asian Citrus Psyllid and nymphs with waxy tubules
Photo courtesy UCANR

Asian Citrus Psyllid nymphs
Photo courtesy UCANR

There is no cure for HLB, which has been found in southern California but not yet in our area. However, the psyllid has been found here, so it's very important to be on the lookout. The most telltale sign is the curly white waxy tube with a bulb at the end that each nymph exudes. The adult insect is about the size of an aphid with mottled brown wings, and the nymphs are yellowish with red eyes. You will find them on new growth, primarily in spring and fall. Using a hand lens can be helpful for identification. If you find Asian Citrus Psyllids, call the California Department of Food and Agriculture Exotic Pest hotline at 1-800-491-1899. Since the psyllid is present in our area we are under quarantine, meaning no plant parts may be transported to other areas. Transport fruit only if it is thoroughly washed and free of twigs and leaves.

For more information on growing citrus trees and the Asian Citrus Psyllid, go to www.ipm.ucanr.edu , and click on Citrus under Ag Pest Management in the left-hand column, or Exotic and Invasive Pests in the lower right quadrant of the screen.

February Garden Checklist

- Plant bare root shrubs and trees, like roses and fruit trees
- Continue baiting for ants, snails, slugs and earwigs
- Monitor for Asian citrus psyllid
- Prune deciduous trees and shrubs such as fruit trees, crepe myrtle and roses. Remove dead, diseased wood, making cuts properly to encourage good structure. Spray with horticultural oil to control insects and diseases. Spray peaches to prevent peach leaf curl one more time before bud break.
- Cut back deciduous sages such as Mexican sage to within 6-8 inches from the ground. Cut back fountain grasses to within18 inches to 2 feet off the ground.
- Plant seedlings of broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and lettuce and parsley. Plant beets, chard, carrots and peas from seed. Spring flowers such as violas, pansies, snapdragons and Iceland poppies can also be planted now.
- Continue adjusting irrigation according to the weather. Do not water within 48 hours of measurable rain.