



# Drops of Citrusy Sunshine: Lemons

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The more you learn about the sunny-yellow lemon, the more you will discover that it is a fruit with tremendous “ap-peel!” Inside and out, few fruit have its same versatility. Rich in Vitamin C, lemons can enhance about any type of food, as slices or wedges of the fruit make a delightful garnish on seafood or meat; its zest, or grated rind, is often used in baking decadent desserts; and its leaves can be used to make tea. Plus, a fresh squeeze of its flavorful juice adds a citrusy pop to hot or iced tea, among other beverages.

Aside from these culinary applications, lemons can be useful for a variety of household and beauty purposes. A wonderful cleaning aid, the fruit’s juice has a natural acidity that makes it excellent for removing stains; a salted slice works well on copper-bottomed pots; and the oil derived from its peel is used in furniture polishes, detergents, soaps and shampoos. In addition to these uses, lemons can deliver skincare and beauty benefits, as the juice can be an ingredient in brightening, cleansing, clarifying and moisturizing your skin, while the peel oil is essential for perfume blending, particularly in colognes. Beyond these properties, the unmistakable citrusy fragrance of lemons is an instant uplift, one that has been found to release “feel-good” hormones and to reduce stress!

Today, nearly 50 varieties of lemons, a fruit botanically known as the *Citrus limon* that is scientifically considered to be a hybrid

between a sour orange and a citron, are grown around the world. These citrus gems continue to flourish in their country of origin, India, with Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and the United States also recognized as top-producing nations. In the U.S., while California and Arizona grow the majority of our lemon crop, many types of lemons were developed in or have significant ties to Florida. First grown here, the Avon is used primarily for frozen concentrate. Originally called the ‘Sicily,’ the ‘Bearss’ came from a seedling planted in 1892 located in the Bearss Grove in Lutz. Introduced from Sicily in 1875, the ‘Villafranca’ was Florida’s leading lemon for years and produces high quality fruit. Other popular varieties in the United States include the ‘Eureka,’ which has become America’s top commercial and home-planted lemon, one that is known for both its high juice content and acid level. The familiar, juicy Meyer is believed to be a hybrid of a lemon and a mandarin orange. A large lemon, the Ponderosa is used for dessert pies and juice.

If you want to enjoy lemons as often as possible, you may want to consider growing a lemon tree, since upon maturation and with the proper care, it is possible for it to produce fruit year-round. Since lemon trees grow best in tropical regions and the temperature in the Gulf Coast can dip below 50 degrees, it is recommended that you plant your tree in a large, draining pot and place it inside your home. Be sure to put it where it will be exposed to a lot of light, like a sunroom or next to a window, because it needs 7 to 8 hours of sunlight a day to thrive.

When picking your plant, Meyer lemon trees, which produce small to medium fruits with a strong flavor, are probably the most common for indoor growing. Pink variegated lemon trees are another good option for beginners and produce lemons with pink flesh. While it is possible to grow a lemon tree from seed, gardening experts recommend that selecting one that’s between two and three years in age from a nursery is a better option, since it will continue to grow and is able to produce fruit much sooner.

Pay particular attention to the soil your tree is planted in because the quality of it can have a significant impact on its growth. Sandy soil, which will afford great drainage for your tree, can be an excellent choice, while soil with high clay content may stunt its growth; however, by mixing in a little sand or gravel, this can easily be fixed. If you are hoping for a bumper crop of lemons, you may want to supplement with one of the varieties of plant food specifically developed for citrus trees.

Lemon trees flourish best when their soil is kept moist. Knowing when to water this plant is easy—all you have to do is to periodically check the top two inches of the soil. When this layer is moderately dry, give your tree a thorough watering until excess water drains out of the bottom of the pot and into the saucer, then empty out the saucer. Since it mimics the essential humidity of your tree’s natural outdoor environment, misting with a spray bottle is an important part of caring for your tree, and it should be done on a frequent, if not daily, basis.

Another way to tend to your tree is through pruning, or cutting off branches that aren’t thriving or flowering, since this may help to

increase the yield of fruit. It’s best to occasionally remove dead, broken, and diseased branches, and to thin others to control the height and spread of your tree as space allows. Related to this, some gardening experts advise that once a cluster of lemons develops, cutting off two-thirds of these will give the remaining fruit more space for maturing to full size.

When your fruit are ripe and ready to harvest, you can use shears to snip them free, but they should twist right off the branch, since truly ripe lemons usually drop with a fair amount of ease. From your tree to your table, you will love the citrusy tang of your freshly grown lemons!



Turn to page 54 for delicious lemon recipes.

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