

The Root System of a Lemon Tree

By Teo Spengler

Lemon tree, very pretty, but the lemon roots are ... shallow. It doesn't make a pretty rhyme, but it's a helpful fact for a gardener making decisions about planting, watering and mulch. Whether you select an ordinary lemon tree (*Citrus limon*) or an "Improved Meyer," you'll need to get to take care of the roots before you begin counting your fruit.



Abundant lemon trees growing in a grove.

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Lemon Laws

Growing lemon trees won't present many problems if you're lucky enough to live in a warm climate. They are generally easy to grow and they light up your backyard with exquisite white blossoms, intoxicating fragrance, brilliant yellow fruit and year-round foliage. These little beauties grow outdoors in U.S. Department of Agriculture plant hardiness zones 9 through 11, but you can grow a container plant in far colder climates. Your primary concern is to get the roots the nutrients they need when they need them.

The Root of the Problem

You have to take the lemon tree's root structure into account at every stage of planting and growing. The roots stay largely in the top 24 inches of soil, because a system of woody roots develops laterally from the trunk in all directions, traveling horizontally well beyond the drip line of the tree. Bunches of fibrous roots grow from the woody roots, and it is these that have primary responsibility for obtaining water and nutrients for the plant. Root growth takes place in "flushes" that occur from February through November. Failure to protect provide adequate water during these flushes can kill a lemon tree, but too much water can also be dangerous.

Planting Comes First

When you are placing that root ball into the hole you have prepared, keep those roots in mind. Given the spread of the root system, make the hole as deep as the root ball but no deeper, and at least twice as wide. Lemon trees require well-draining soil, so amend heavy soil by working in several inches of compost or creating a raised bed. The top of the root ball should sit just above the soil line. You'll need to keep the root

is mature, you should water further from the trunk about once a week, allowing the soil to dry out between waterings.

Mulching Protects and Nourishes

Think of mulch as the soft blanket you tuck around your tree to protect it. Although mulch can consist of virtually any material layered over the soil beneath a plant, lemons do best with organic compost or chopped, dried leaves. Spread a 4- to 6-inch layer over the soil in the root zone area, keeping the mulch a few inches from the trunk. The material keeps down weeds, regulates the soil temperature and eventually disintegrates into the soil, providing nutrients for the tree. It's also a good idea to remove all lemons that form the first few years to allow that energy to be used to strengthen the root system.

Root Pests

Healthy lemon trees growing in healthy soil generally have few pest problems. But pests and diseases that live in the soil can damage a lemon tree's roots. The two worst offenders are the citrus nematode (*Tylenchulus semipenetrans*), and the bacteria causing fibrous root rot, *Phytophthora parasitica*. You can help your lemon tree roots avoid these issues by giving spacing them at least 12 feet from each other and from other trees. This prevents pests from traveling from one tree to another and also limits canopy shading of the soil, which encourages pest populations.



Teo Spengler

From Alaska to California, from France's Basque Country to Mexico's Pacific Coast, Teo Spengler has dug the soil, planted seeds and helped trees, flowers and veggies thrive [More](#)

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Indoor Lemon Tree Care

By Shawna Kennedy

Dwarf lemon trees not only make attractive houseplants, they're functional, producing fragrant flowers and edible fruit. Glossy, green leaves are evergreen and provide year-round interest. Indoors, with proper pruning, lemon trees can be maintained at 3 to 5 feet tall. Lemons flower throughout the year and bear full-sized fruit approximately three to four months after flowering.

Lemons make a beautiful house plant

Soil

Citrus trees thrive in a somewhat sandy, all-purpose soil that is slightly acidic. Amending the soil with plenty of organic matter such as peat will help the soil retain moisture. The soil will need to be amended with fertilizer every three to four months. Many garden stores sell fertilizer specifically for citrus trees.

Temperature and Light

Your lemon tree needs at least six hours of sun every day. Place your lemon tree near a south-facing window. You can also supplement natural light with a fluorescent light, especially in the winter. Be sure to rotate your tree every week or so to get even light exposure. Citrus trees thrive at temperatures between 55 degrees F and 85 degrees F, making them happy trees when grown indoors.

Moisture

Container-grown lemon trees need more water than those planted outside. In the spring, water two to three times a week. In the summer, as temperatures rise, your lemon tree may need to be watered daily. Keep the soil moist but not soggy. A good indication of when you should water is to check the top 2 to 3 inches of soil. If it is dry to the touch, your lemon tree needs watering. Houses generally don't have the humidity lemon trees need to grow. Mist or spray your lemon tree several times a week.

Pollination

In order for your indoor lemon tree to produce fruit it needs to be pollinated. Your lemon tree may self-pollinate, but to assure a good harvest, it's wise not to count on it. Not many of us have birds or bees inside the house, so the best way to do this is by pollinating the tree yourself. Using a cotton swab or a paintbrush, rub the inside of a flower collecting a bit of the yellow pollen. Transfer the pollen to another flower, going from flower to flower until you're done.

Don't prune your lemon tree until it is 2 to 3 years old. After that, prune to maintain its shape and keep it healthy. Don't be afraid to prune because lemon trees are incredibly hardy. Cut off any suckers or shoots growing under the graft line. These will drain the energy from your lemon tree. Remove any dead branches. Prune back any long branches or weak-looking stems. Remove stems that are growing toward the center of the tree. Frequent light pruning is better than heavy pruning.

Insects

Even indoors, your lemon tree may fall prey to insect infestation. The first defense against indoor pests is to keep the tree healthy. Tiny and related to the spider, spider mites are a common indoor pest. Because they're not insects, insecticides generally are not effective against them. Mealybugs feed on the sap of your citrus leaves and excrete honeydew, which encourages the growth of fungus. Washing the top and underside of your lemon tree leaves with mild, soapy water prevents and helps eliminate infestations. Insecticidal soap is effective against mealybugs and spider mites.

Shawna Kennedy

Shawna Kennedy has been writing and editing professionally since 2004. She's published numerous articles online and two of her edited manuscripts have been contracted and published by Random House.

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