HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

CITRUS CLEANUP

As you clean up your landscape from the winter months of neglect, don't forget about your citrus trees. Most fruit, with a few exceptions, are past their harvest time and the trees are ready to begin blooming again. In order to produce a plentiful crop next fall, they are going to need some care. Now is the time to fertilize your trees, clean them up, and remove debris and weeds from under the canopy.

First, a little housekeeping needs to be done around your citrus tree. Clean up any debris and plants that may be under the tree. This area under the canopy of the tree should be bare ground. There should not be any grass, weeds, or other plants in this area. These plants will compete with the citrus tree for water and nutrients. They also increase the humidity around the trunk of the tree, which can cause disease set in. Mulches should also be avoided for the same reason. However, if they must be used, keep it at least a foot away from tree trunks.

Next, take out any dead branches in the canopy of the tree. If there are any broken branches, you can remove them at this time, too. This is not the time to prune your citrus tree, unless it is absolutely necessary. Pruning actually is never necessary except to shape the trees or remove water sprouts or suckers. Be certain to make pruning cuts flush with the trunk or surface to be cut. Do not leave stubs as they may be attacked by rotting organisms which could damage the tree. After the ground is bare under the tree and the dead branches are removed, it is time to fertilize.

Fertilizer is an important factor in home citrus care. It helps in the proper growth and development of young trees and the development of large crops and good quality fruit of mature trees. Although, fertilization is important, it is not a complicated procedure. You just need to follow the UF/IFAS recommendations. Proper citrus tree fertilization includes applying fertilizer three times per year in the correct amounts.

Young citrus trees (less than 5 years) have a different fertilizer schedule than mature trees. We will discuss the fertilization of mature trees. An 8-8-8 or similar fertilizer analysis with other macro and micronutrients is a good general fertilizer for citrus trees.

To determine how much fertilizer to apply, measure the circumference of the trunk (in inches) of the tree one foot from the ground. This number is the pounds of fertilizer you should apply to the citrus tree per year. Therefore, by fertilizing three times a year, you will need to divide that number by three to obtain the pounds that need to be applied per application. For example, a tree with a trunk circumference of twelve will be fertilized with four pounds of fertilizer three times a year.

When applying the fertilizer, you want to broadcast it evenly throughout the area under the canopy. This means from the drip line of the tree in towards the trunk. The feeder roots of the citrus trees extend throughout this area, so only placing a thin ring of fertilizer around the trunk would not be sufficient. Fertilizer near or in contact with the truck should also be avoided. Be careful not to apply too much fertilizer. Exceeding fertilizer recommendations can be just as harmful (or even more so) than as not applying enough. After spreading the fertilizer, water it in as directed on the fertilizer label.

The timing of the three fertilizer applications is not crucial as long as they are reasonably spread apart during the year. With proper fertilization, you will increase the health and crop of your citrus tree. For more information on home citrus care, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls Monday - Friday from 10am to 2pm.

Plant Sale
As you are spring cleaning your landscape, how about adding some new plants? The Osceola County Master Gardeners will be holding their Spring Plant Sale and Garden Seminars on Friday March 26th and Saturday March 27th from 9am to noon, at the Extension Office, Osceola Heritage Park. Old garden roses, perennials, annuals, and bromeliads are just some of the plants available.

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Date: March 14th, 2004