Speaker 1:

Welcome to Urban Plant Health Network's podcast series, The Good, the Bad and the Bug-ly.

Drew Radford:

Citrus trees are a staple in any edible garden. Oranges, lemons, limes, kumquats, even grapefruit can be grown successfully in cooler climates, if you know which varieties to choose and how to care for them. It's equally important to know what pests and diseases can look like in your citrus, and how then to manage them. To find out how to do so, we're joined in the Urban Plant Health Network studio by Jeff Milne, National Citrus Surveillance Coordinator at Citrus Australia. Jeff, thanks for your time.

Jeff Milne:

That's okay, Drew.

Drew Radford:

Jeff, when people think of citrus, perhaps the first place they don't think of is Melbourne. But you can grow citrus trees there. What can you grow?

Jeff Milne:

You could grow any sort of citrus, but you're probably better off to talk to your nurseryman about what's best for your particular soil type and environment. And if you find a nice, warm site, depending on what you're growing. But yeah, anything could grow. I know lemons are particularly popular.

Drew Radford:

So, it comes down to really what? Aspect? The sun exposure and soil?

Jeff Milne:

Yeah, your sun exposure and soil, and make sure you look after them.

Drew Radford:

When you say, "Make sure you look after them," water's the first thing, citrus like a lot of water, but Melbourne's fairly good on that front, isn't it?

Jeff Milne:

Yeah. But then, the soils are a bit heavier, and you've got to be careful you don't get soil-borne pathogens, phytophthora and stuff like that, if you're in heavy soil. Citrus tend to grow better on sandy and lighter soils, but you can get different rootstocks, depending on your soil type.

Drew Radford:

Okay, so water application. Don't over water it, but what else should you be doing to look after those citrus trees?

Jeff Milne:

To start with, I consider a citrus tree to be like a pet. You need to plan for them, they need regular care, they'll grow a lot bigger, and they might get sick. You know, it's not just as simple as grabbing a seed out of the lemon you got from the supermarket last week and planting it. Commercial citrus trees are all grown on rootstocks, and the rootstocks depend on what soil you're planting it in, resistance to disease, what size tree you want to grow. And then, once you've got the right rootstock, you graft a sian bud of the citrus variety you want, and then grow that out. It's probably two years since the nurseryman start until you get a tree in your nursery, ready to take home.

Drew Radford:

And then what else for your plant, then, Jeff?

Jeff Milne:

Well, work out where you're going to put it remembering, as I said, it's going to grow up. Probably better to protect it from cold southwest winds, make sure it's not in a cold, shady corner of the garden or all those sort of things. But yeah, even in Melbourne, you should be able to grow most citrus.

Drew Radford:

Is there a particularly best time to fertilise a citrus tree if I've got one, Jeff?

Jeff Milne:

Probably a little and often is best Drew. Particularly in Melbourne, you've got to be a bit careful with lemons and citrus gall wasp. You don't want to give them a big hit of nitrogen in early spring, which will then create a lot of growth flush, which is particularly attractive to the gall wasp. So little and often, and that's the way industry does it now, with drip irrigation. Just keep them ticking along with enough food all the way through the season.

Drew Radford:

Now you mentioned there the dreaded gall wasp, I've got a lime tree in my backyard, and I'm constantly hacking bits off of it. I've recently tried, this season, Kaolin clay, I think it's called, spraying it on. I'm hoping I haven't killed the thing in the process, but any good tips for dealing with the dreaded gall wasp? First of all, what is it, even, for those that don't know it?

Jeff Milne:

Gall wasp's a little native wasp from Northern New South Wales and Queensland. And what happens, it lays it’s eggs in the young branches, and the eggs hatch and the larvae, the grubs, feed inside the branch. The tree, in response, develops a gall. And then the grubs come out in spring, turn into moths, and start the whole thing all over again.

It's very problematic to look after them in your backyard, because no matter how hard you try, if next door doesn't, the wasp, it will just jump the fence. Chemical control's difficult that Kaolin clay you spoke about, that puts a sort of shield over the leaf and makes it less attractive to the wasps to lay. But the other thing is, try not to create any real big growth flushes with too much fertilizer. And when possible, cut the galls out roundabout June, or even earlier. If you see them before then, put them in a black plastic bag in the sun, and that'll cook the wasps over a month or so.

Drew Radford:

Wow. So, you've got to be that forensic in terms of actually getting rid of those lumps. They're woody lumps, but you call them galls. Don't just cut them out, you're saying kill them in a black plastic bag. I didn't know that.

Jeff Milne:

Yeah, don't just throw them in your compost, because if it stays moist and the grubs can still develop, there might be enough sap left in your plant to let them complete their life cycle and fly out of your compost bin. There's a few other things. The ABC garden show, a few weeks ago, had you peel the galls with a potato peeler, which exposes the grubs and they'll dry out, but peeling citrus trees with a potato peeler looks like a recipe for losing a finger or two, to me.

Drew Radford:

Yeah. Strikes me as fairly hard work, as well. And in terms of that Kaolin clay, the thing that I was concerned about when I sprayed it, was whether I was suffocating the tree as well, because it layers everything with, essentially, a milky, white surface.

Jeff Milne:

Yeah, it's pretty interesting. It doesn't interfere with transpiration. In fact, it was first used to reduce transpiration, reduce water loss, and protect the leaves from sunburn. So, it's really just sunscreen and ticks along underneath, as per normal,

Drew Radford:

Are there any other pests and diseases that we should be looking out for, in particular, regarding citrus trees at the moment, Jeff, or throughout the year, really?

Jeff Milne:

Well, Australia is pretty lucky that we don't have many of the devastating citrus diseases that are around the world, such as huanglongbing or “citrus greening” and its psyllid vectors. Citrus canker, that we've recently had an outbreak in the Northern territory and Western Australia that's almost under control. There's Xylella, or citrus variegated chlorosis. So, we've got a lot of diseases that aren't here, and some of them are quite devastating. Unfortunately, border security is regularly confiscating citrus material. Often, they'll find these diseases, been hidden in bike tubes, hidden in back pockets, all sorts of things. There's some pretty good information around on websites. Rather than try and describe them, if you go to the extensionAUS™ Urban Plant Health Network, there's some good information there. And if there's something you're really unsure about, we've got an exotic plant pest hotline, 1800 084 881, if you see something that really looks out of whack.

Drew Radford:

So really, Jeff, in summary, we're pretty lucky in Australia when it comes to growing citrus. It's really down to, don't overfeed them, watch out for gall wasp, and make sure you've chosen the right rootstock for the right soil.

Jeff Milne:

Yeah, that's right. And make sure your citrus trees from a reputable nursery. And don't go back home to wherever your grandparents might've come from and bring home a slice of the tree that they grew up with as a present for them. Because you could be bringing one of these very devastating citrus diseases into the country.

Drew Radford:

Jeff, you said to make sure you go to a reputable nursery. What do people need to be considering, then, in that regard?

Jeff Milne:

Well, it's making sure that you get the healthiest planting material, and that it's true to type. That you don't go looking for a Mandarin and finish up with a grapefruit. That the nursery's got the steps in place and you can be sure of what you get. You won't be sold a pup, so to speak.

Drew Radford:

So Melbournites, fear not. Go out and get yourself a citrus tree, just get the right advice to get the right tree in the right part of your garden.

Jeff Milne:

Yeah, and ask a couple of questions. Don't just grab the first one. Have a look, make sure that it looks healthy, that there's no bugs on it. Nothing's been chewing the leaves. Yeah, just treat it like you're buying a car or something. Think about it.

Drew Radford:

Fantastic advice there for actually growing the right citrus tree in your urban backyard in Melbourne, or any of the regional areas across Victoria. Jeff Milne, National Citrus Surveillance Coordinator at Citrus Australia, thank you ever so much for joining me in the Urban Plant Health Network studio today.

Jeff Milne:

My pleasure, Drew. All the best.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for listening to The Good, The Bad and The Bug-ly. For more episodes in this series, find us and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. We would love to hear your feedback, so please leave a comment or rating and share this series with your family and friends.

All information is accurate at the time of release. This podcast was developed for the Urban Plant Health Network.