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# Orange you glad?



**It's the middle of winter, and citrus trees are full of fruit**

In February, they seem to dangle from trees in yards and along-side streets all over Chico: Citrus in a rainbow of neon-bright colors.

But how do you tell when to pick those oranges, lemons and other juicy fruit?

by  
**Debbie Arrington**

When it comes to citrus, color is not enough. You need to take a taste test. It helps if they first got a “kiss of cold.”

We're having a good citrus season, with local trees heavy with fruit. Citrus fruits in the North State ripen slowly, often taking nine months or more to reach their peak of flavor. They also can hang on the tree for months after maturity.

Adding to the puzzle: Citrus will look ripe long before they are ripe. That leads many gardeners to despair that they planted a “bad” orange or grapefruit variety that will never produce “good” fruit.

Right now, navel oranges are reaching full ripeness while Valencias are still a month or more away. Grapefruit, too, need more time.

Weather, climate and growing conditions all factor into the citrus calendar. Grapefruit grown in Nor Cal can take 12 to 18 months to reach full ripeness, twice as long as the same grapefruit varieties grown in Coachella. The more summer heat, the faster citrus develops.

Once picked, citrus won't get sweeter or juicier. Bitter or dry oranges often were just picked too early. In addition, oranges benefit from chilly overnight temperatures in the 30s to bring out their natural sugars.

In January, our oranges finally got that “kiss of cold,” and taste much sweeter for it.

According to local citrus experts, ripe citrus looks bright and full colored. But it also feels heavy for its size and firm when squeezed. A fully ripe orange or lemon will slip easily off its stem without tugging. To pick, gently twist and pull at the same time.

The best way to judge ripeness is by tasting. Pick fruit from opposite sides of the tree and sample. Fruit growing on the outside of the tree tends to ripen faster than fruit that grows closer to the trunk. If the trial oranges taste sweet, the tree is ready to pick. If not, wait a week, then sample again.

The best place to store ripe citrus? Leave it on the tree. Unless there's a bad frost, it will stay fresh and firm until ready for use—or until the tree drops the fruit to make room for more. □

## If life gives you citrus, make sorbet

In desserts, citrus is often brought in to help balance things out or bring out other flavors. Add some lemon zest to baked goods to cut the sweetness; put orange next to chocolate for a perfect marriage of contrasts. But when you want it to be the star of your sweet treat, it's best to leave citrus as unencumbered as possible, and few desserts are as simple—and elegant—as sorbet. All you really need is orange (or lemon, or grapefruit) juice and sugar. The ratio can vary—from 1/4 cup to 1/2 cup sugar for every cup of liquid—depending how sweet you want it, but the more sugar, the more silky and less slushy your final product will be.

### Simple sorbet

3 cups citrus juice (if using lemons, mix 3/4 cup juice with 2 1/4 cups water)

Between 3/4 cup and 1 1/2 cups sugar (based on personal preference)

Pour one cup of juice (or water/lemon mixture) into saucepan with sugar. Cook over med-high and whisk until sugar has dissolved. Remove from heat, stir in remaining liquid. If you have an ice-cream maker, pour in and churn until ready. If not, pour into a freezer-proof dish and place in freezer. Whisk every hour until firm.

—JASON CASSIDY