Let citrus ripen on the tree

Q. How can I determine when my citrus fruit are ready to pick?

A. Florida uses five indexes to determine legal maturity of citrus, including soluble solids, juice content, acid level, soluble solids/acid ratio and skin color. But the home gardener can easily decide when most citrus types are ready to harvest. As the fruit reaches full size and the skin color changes from green to greenish yellow to orange, simply pick some fruit and taste it to see if it is sweet. If not, wait a little longer (a week or two) and test taste another fruit. Meyer lemons are ready when the skin color changes from green to greenish yellow. Satsuma fruit may be ready to eat before the skin becomes completely orange, especially if the early fall is warm. Kumquats are usually at their peak in taste when they become fully orange but can be eaten somewhat earlier if you enjoy a tarter fruit. Citrus fruit does not ripen additionally after it is harvested. So let it mature sufficiently on the plant.

The harvest season for Satsuma is October to December. The harvest season for Meyer lemons is November to March. The harvest season for kumquats is November to April. Most grapefruit have a harvest season from November to May. The harvest season for sweet oranges varies based on the cultivar. Early season oranges are harvested October to January, mid-season oranges are harvested December to February and late-season cultivars are harvested March to June. In general, citrus fruit may mature a little earlier in the harvest season on mature trees and those that are not fertilized as much. But on young, vigorous trees, the number of fruit will usually be less and they will be ready to pick more toward the end of the harvest season. I have a few young Satsuma trees in Crestview and the fruit is still not quite ready to use.

Q. What cold-hardy citrus is best for North Florida?

A. It’s interesting that citrus is not native to Florida. Basically, citrus species are tropical and subtropical in origin. As a result, citrus is not well suited for extreme North Florida. As a matter of fact, the citrus industry has progressively moved further south in Florida due to freezes. So, you’d be wise to choose the more cold-hardy citrus for our area of the state. But even cold-hardy citrus can be severely injured or killed by the occasional hard freeze in North Florida.

According to the UF/IFAS publication Cold-Hardy Citrus for North Florida, “Trifoliate orange can withstand the lowest temperature of all citrus when it is mature and fully dormant, followed by kumquat, satsuma, calamondin, sour orange, mandarin, sweet orange, grapefruit, shaddock, lemon, lime and citron.”

Even though trifoliate orange fruit is edible, it is rarely eaten because it is very sour. But it is our best rootstock for grafted citrus because of its cold hardiness. So when you purchase a grafted citrus tree such as Satsuma, make sure it is grafted onto trifoliate rootstock.
Even though there are some examples of success in extreme North Florida, Grapefruit, shaddock, lemon, lime and citron do not have sufficient cold hardiness to be recommended in our area. The more reliable citrus from a cold hardy standpoint are Satsuma, kumquat and perhaps Meyer lemon.

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December 20, 2005