



Photo: [University of California Riverside](#)

Marris Orange

by Mary Cennamo, BCMG

My favorite citrus tree, Marris Early sweet orange, has been growing in my garden for at least 20 years or more. I have many citrus trees in my small yard, but the Marr's orange is my favorite. It's very easy to grow! This variety of orange was found in 1927 on the place of O. F. Marris, Donna, Texas, where it is said to have occurred as a limb sport in a group of navel orange trees that came from California. The sport was a natural mutation that caused the branch to have different fruits than the original tree. It was then propagated for this trait.

The Marris orange is the size of a navel orange but does not have the thick skin. It has very few seeds.

My Marris orange tree has reached its mature size. At about 12-ft by 12-ft, it is a small tree that does well in a small yard. It does have one-inch thorns on its branches, so you have to be careful when you pick the fruit in the fall.

In the spring, when the tree is in bloom, the flowers have a sweet fragrance similar to a gardenia. The bees love it which is good for pollination!

Planting and winter protection

David Rodriguez, Bexar County AgriLife Extension Horticulturist, recommends that you grow your young citrus in a pot for three years. Each year check the roots and repot it in a larger pot to keep it from getting root bound. After the third year, tree should then have a large enough root system to help it survive freezes after you plant it in the ground. The Marris orange can survive a winter temperature down to 26 degrees. You may need to give it some protection from colder temperatures, or when we have low temperatures for a long time.

I have had success growing mine in the ground in a particular microclimate. It is growing in my back yard on the north side of my yard. It has the house on its backside which provides warmth in the winter. It has a deck on the right side and on the opposite side it has the protection from cold winter winds from a 100-year-old oak tree that is 30 feet tall and a ponderosa lemon that is at least 20 feet tall. Because my Marris orange is well protected in the winter, I rarely have to use lights or blankets to protect the tree.

Last year, I met a man at the San Antonio Botanical Gardens that shared some advice for protecting citrus trees. You can build a temporary cube-shaped greenhouse out of PVC pipe and then wrap it with blankets. My husband helped me build one that comes apart for storage during the rest of the



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year. As your tree grows you can add more PVC pipe. We have used that to protect our trees that do not have the house and other trees as protection.

Watering

For my mature Marrs orange I make sure it gets one inch of water per week in the summer and less during the rest of the year. David Rodriguez recommends that I keep my citrus well-watered when the tree has fruit in order to keep the fruit hydrated through the October/November harvesting time. With less water the taste of the fruit is affected, and it is not as sweet.

Fertilizing, pruning and mulching

I provide slow-release lawn fertilizer twice-a-year. In the spring, I mulch with shredded live oak leaves that have composted over the winter. I prune only the dead branches in the spring.

Thinning

One little fact that I learned just this year in David's citrus class is you should always thin your fruit. Too many oranges growing close together on a branch compete with each other for sunlight and nutrients. When you remove some of the small oranges it gives the remaining orange enough room to reach its optimum size.

Pests and insecticide use

Very few pest or critters bother my tree! While it does get white flies occasionally, I usually am able to spray them daily with a hard blast of water to get rid of them! They are more of a nuisance and do not affect the production of fruit or the life of the tree.



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The reason I choose not to spray with insecticides is because of the bees for pollination and the butterflies! Beautiful giant swallowtail butterflies will lay their eggs on the orange tree. The resulting caterpillars look like bird feces. It is one of the ways the caterpillars hide from their prey. Fascinating! The caterpillars don't eat that much and then they turn into a beautiful yellow and black swallowtail butterfly. The swallowtail seems to prefer my orange tree to the lemon and lime trees that I have in my yard.

My hope is that everyone understands that they can plant a citrus tree, either in a pot or in the ground, in San Antonio, Texas!

For more information on growing citrus I recommend the Citrus Fact Sheet from Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service: <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/fruit-nut/fact-sheets/citrus/>