

LEMON 檸檬 | *Citrus limon*

The origin of this well-known and important fruit is shrouded in mystery, but is believed to be native to Northern India. It is a small tree, up to 4 m, much branched and protected by stiff, sharp thorns. The dark green leaves are alternate, simple, oval, and delightfully aromatic when crushed. Flowers appear in the spring. The unopened flowers are a light purple on the outside, cream-coloured when fully open, and mildly fragrant. The oval, yellow, very sour fruit hardly needs description, but a milder version, the “Meyer” lemon (possibly a cross between lemon and orange) is noticeably less acidic, a smaller size, less thorny, and better for containers. Fruits should be ready for picking in the late summer.

The original trees, so-called “rough” lemons (*C. jhambiri*), are no longer an important source of lemons having been superseded by newer cultivars. Nevertheless, they have a very useful role in providing robust and fast-growing rootstock for other citrus crops and plants to be grafted onto, such as the popular Chinese New Year tangerines. The fruit is twice the size of an ordinary lemon and entirely green with a thick knobbly skin. Sour like all lemons, it has in addition, a bitter hint. This combination makes for an exceptionally delicious lemonade even though it is less juicy than common lemons.

Lemon leaves are useful in cooking. The finely shredded leaves are an essential accompaniment to snake soup, a popular winter delicacy.

How I acquired a rough lemon tree is interesting. Some years ago I spotted this tree with green lemons in a garden in Kowloon. I started a conversation with the gardener within, who was lamenting his inability to afford fertiliser. A deal was struck: one bag of organic fertiliser in exchange for an air-layered lemon tree. This gentlemen’s agreement had a happy conclusion a few months later and the tree is now contentedly growing in a planter in my garden and producing good fruit every year. In fact, rough lemons can be raised from seeds, and some, like the “Meyer”, can be started from cuttings.



Lemon



Rough lemon: note the thick rind

PEANUT (Groundnut) 花生 | *Arachis hypogaea*

Peanut is a native of South America which is now widely grown all over the world as an important commercial crop. It is arguably the world's favourite snack, rendered in many forms. An important source of cooking oil and peanut butter, it also provides dense calories in energy-rich food supplements. As a legume, peanut fixes nitrogen from the air and deposits it in its roots. This is the reason why it can be used as “green manure”—to be grown and then dug into the ground to enrich the soil.

Although called a nut, peanut being a legume, is actually a pulse. It has pinnate leaves with a variable number of leaflets and small yellow flowers. As the flower fades the stalk or “peg” lengthens and curves downwards towards the ground for the pod to develop under the surface (*hypogaea* means “under the earth”) where within the shell, one to four seeds develop. Harvest by digging up the whole plant, like potatoes.



Peanut showing “pegs”



Harvested peanuts

Peanut is not a plant commonly grown in home gardens but I grow it all the time because of its very interesting growth pattern. Visitors to my garden are always amazed when I demonstrate how the pods develop beneath the surface.

Grow peanuts by buying fresh peanuts from a Chinese grocery and plant them straight into the ground, much as you would plant beans. Start sowing in February and harvest eight to ten weeks later. The plants self-seed, and you will find little plantlets appearing all over the area. In fact they can be grown throughout the year.

Peanut is a good source of vitamin E, folate and niacin. It also has as much antioxidant as most fruits and is therefore cardio-protective. The oil is rich in monounsaturated fats, also cardio-protective. One problem with peanut is the occasional allergic reaction to it. The reaction varies in severity, but at worst, it may result in anaphylactic shock which may be fatal. About 1–2% of the population of North America is affected, but it seems to be much less of a problem in Asia. Nevertheless, food containing peanut must always be labelled to indicate its presence.

STRAWBERRY 草莓 | *Fragaria*

For many years in Hong Kong, strawberries were regarded as something of a luxury, imported from far away, expensive and aristocratic—think strawberries and cream, with champagne. This is no longer the case, as supplies increase, and producers now moving closer to home, in Asia. Locally produced strawberries are still not generally available, but specialist organic farms are now springing up, supplying mostly up-market establishments for the present.

There are about a dozen species of this genus, native to the temperate areas of the northern hemisphere. They are perennials with a low-growing habit, tufted or creeping. The distinctive palmate leaves are composed of three toothed leaflets and the flowers are white with five petals, appearing in cymes. The fruit itself is actually a false fruit, made up of tiny pips on a fleshy receptacle.

The small-time Hong Kong gardener would do best to start off with young plants purchased from a nursery. These are available in late October and can often be found in the Mong Kok flower market. The plants are best grown in rectangular plastic containers raised off the ground—hanging from a fence or railing, or propped up on bricks. The plants themselves should be positioned at the margin of the planter so that when the fruits form, they will hang over the edge, away from the soil surface. A delightful crop of ripe strawberries should be ready for picking in about two months—a good way to impress your friends!

After fruiting, the plants can be kept so that runners are produced which are used for propagation the following season. These runners are pegged down onto small pots containing potting soil and little plants will develop in due course. If this is too much of a chore, then start with new, bought plants again. Strawberries can also be started from seed—indeed some species produce no runners and must be so started—but this is even more of a chore.



Strawberry - propagation by runners



Young strawberry



The harvest