

# Get Acquainted With Kumquat



By BJ Jarvis, County Extension Director and Horticulture Agent

So, what is a kumquat? The

kumquat (kuhm' kwaht) is a small, oblong citrus fruit, with fruit that resembles a miniature orange and the size of a plum. Kumquats are prized for their combination of sweetness and tartness in a single bite – yum!

In central Pasco County, the “kumquat capital of the world” is located in the tiny town of St. Joseph. This area is the world’s leading producer and shipper of kumquat fruit.

Kumquats have been called “the little gold gems of the citrus family.” With a thin, sweet peel and a zesty, somewhat tart center, kumquats taste best when eaten whole, just like grapes (peel too!). Some recommend rolling the ripened fruit between the thumb and forefinger to release the juices and tasty essential oils.

## Growing Kumquat

If you fall in love with the fruit, you’ll want to try growing them. This easy-to-grow small tree grows more than ten feet tall, has few or no thorns and small, glossy leaves. The yellow-to-bright-reddish-orange fruit are very showy, borne in large numbers. A steady harvest is available from November through April. Producing over 8,000 pounds of fruit per acre, the home grower can expect high yield from each tree.

Two varieties of kumquats are grown in Florida:

- *Nagami* (oval) kumquat (*Fortunella margarita*) is the most popular. The deep-orange fruit are small ovals, have 2-5 seeds, and are pleasantly flavored. A beautiful variegated variety, Centennial, makes a nice specimen plant.
- *Meiwa* (large round) (*F. crassifolia*) are sometimes called “the sweet kumquat” as this variety is not as tart as the Nagami. This large, round kumquat has a thick peel, sweet pulp and juice, and is nearly seedless.

Since the plants remain semi-dormant during winter, they are one of the most cold-hardy, citrus-like plants available (able to withstand temperatures as low as

18°F.) However, kumquats store food reserves in their leaves and must, therefore, be protected from stresses that will cause leaf drop such as too little sun or water, or other environmental factors.

Kumquat trees are well-suited for growing in the ground as well as in a container.

## Planting in the Ground

Plants thrive in central Florida’s weather, performing well in locations that receive plenty of sunshine. Purchase plants from a reputable nursery and withhold additional fertilizer for the first month or so, as plants usually have a slow-release fertilizer in the pot at purchase. Additional fertilizer would cause damage and burn. Use one formulated for citrus.

Mulch, especially around young trees, will help reduce weed competition, but keep it back about 12” from the trunk to discourage disease problems. Young trees require considerable water to get well established, and then water only when Mother Nature isn’t cooperating.

## Container Growing

Choose as large of a container as possible. Whether the container is clay or plastic, make sure it has good drainage; drilling extra holes if you’re in doubt. To prevent soil from washing out of larger holes, cover drain holes with small sections of fine window screen rather than stones. To facilitate drainage and allow good air circulation around the container, raise it slightly off the ground. This also discourages nematodes from entering through the bottom holes.

Any plant is more cold-sensitive when grown in a container, which is true for kumquats. Only when grown in containers do kumquats need protection from freezing temperatures. Group containers closely in a protected location or cover with a blanket on a cold night.

## Fertilizers

Whether grown in a container or in the ground, kumquats are heavy feeders and perform best with a regular fertilizing program. Be sure to water well before and after applying fertilizer to help prevent

burn. If possible, buy a fertilizer formulated for citrus and one that has at least 1/3 slow-release nitrogen in it, such as 12-0-12 or 15-0-14. These slower-release fertilizers provide 6 months or more of continuous nutrients, reducing effort and cost.

### Weeds and Sod

Do not allow weeds or sod to grow up near the tree trunk. They will compete with root activity. Mulch and old-fashioned hand pulling are the best deterrents.

### Watering

Any new plant needs water to get established. Be certain to grow kumquats within reach of a garden hose or an irrigation system. In addition, container-grown specimens require more regular watering. If grown in the landscape, supplemental irrigation of other plants will be sufficient. Once established, though kumquats don't need a tremendous amount of watering.

### Pruning

Remove suckers from the tree as they can sap the energy from fruit production. Although pruning isn't required, kumquats can be pruned to shape without diminishing next year's fruiting ability. After harvest time (November through April), pick the fruit then prune the tree before new flowers appear.

### Pests

Leafminer is one of the most often questioned pests on kumquat. Don't worry though, as typically the

numbers are so low that a reduction in the home kumquat production is not noticeable. In addition, the signs of leafminer activity are usually not noticed until long after any effective treatment.




Signs of Citrus Leafminer  
Credits: J. Castner, University of Florida

If a black smut appears on the upper surface of the leaves, then scale is probably the answer. This common insect can be seen on kumquats and other citrus trees. Control scale with a bio-rational insecticide such as an insecticidal soap or an inexpensive homemade concoction (bio-rational insecticide recipe below).

### In General

Kumquats are an easy-to-grow plant that pays big harvest dividends in winter. After just a couple of years, they will begin bearing fruit and are a nice evergreen addition to the landscape. Try adding one or more to your garden.

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**CONTROLS:**

- APHIDS
- LACEBUGS
- MEALY BUGS
- SCALE
- SPIDER MITES
- THRIPS
- WHITEFLY

**BIO-SAFE PLANT SPRAY**

2 1/2 TABLESPOONS VEGETABLE OIL  
2 1/2 TABLESPOONS MILD DISHWASHING LIQUID  
1 GALLON WATER

- 1) SPRAY AGAIN AFTER 5-7 DAYS.
- 2) SPRAY BACKSIDE OF LEAVES.
- 3) DON'T SPRAY IN SUN AND IF TEMPERATURE IS 90 DEGREES OR ABOVE.



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