Arizona’s Five C’s

Citrus

Those oranges, lemons, or grapefruits that you buy at the grocery store, or grow in your back yard, have their origin thousands of years ago in Asia, in an area bordered by India, Myanmar (Burma), and China.

Gradually spreading west to Europe, citrus was brought to America by Spanish and Portuguese explorers in the early 1500s, first to the West Indies, then Mexico, Brazil, and Florida. Catholic missionaries brought citrus plants to Arizona with them from Mexico, beginning in the early 1700s. Father Eusebio Kino reportedly introduced oranges to Arizona in 1707.

Arizona’s climate, “with low frost, minimal high winds, and endless sunshine,” was to lead Arizona to eventually become one of only four citrus-producing states in the U.S. But for many years, citrus never expanded beyond limited mission and settlement plantings and home gardens.

Citrus as a Cash Crop

The story of citrus in Arizona really begins in the 1870s in Phoenix’s Salt River Valley when Jack Swilling (known as the founder of Phoenix) began to dig out the old Hohokam canals to provide irrigation for crops to feed miners and cavalrymen. Farmers and speculators poured into the valley. By 1872, farmers were growing barley, wheat, corn, beans, and sweet potatoes on eight thousand irrigated acres.

Between 1883 and 1885, a new canal, the American Canal, was built by William J. Murphy to redirect water from the Salt River.

In 1889 Murphy planted an experimental citrus grove in Ingleside, near Phoenix. By 1895 150,000 citrus trees, mostly oranges, had been planted in the Salt River Valley. Citrus groves in Yuma and Mesa quickly followed, with over 1,500 acres planted by the mid-1890s. Citrus was well on the way to becoming an important cash crop for Arizona.

Citrus, cotton, and other crops helped Phoenix grow rapidly and the Salt River Valley emerged as one of the most important agricultural regions in Arizona. By 1889 Phoenix became the capital of the Arizona Territory.

But after an impressive beginning, Arizona’s citrus industry grew slowly. Distribution problems plagued operations until 1928, when producers formed the Arizona Citrus Growers Association that helped lower the high costs of transportation. Citrus acreage increased to 21,000 acres in 1935, and peaked around 1970 with 80,000 acres.

Arizona’s citrus crop has changed over the years too. By the 1930s, grapefruit was king and production peaked in the 1940s. Oranges regained the lead, with production peaking around 1970. Significant lemon production started in the late 1950s, was strong throughout the 1970s and 1980s, then gradually declined. Tangerine production started in 1965, peaked in the mid-1980s, and then gradually declined with lemons.
Declining Production

Heavy urban development from the 1970s on has slashed citrus farming in Arizona. In 2011-2012 citrus was grown on only 13,000 acres, continuing a steady decline.

Lemons are now by far the leading citrus fruit, but production today is only a third of peak values. Yuma County has become the largest citrus growing region in the state.

The last fruit packing plant in Mesa closed in 2010 because there wasn’t enough local fruit being produced to support it. The production of grapefruit and oranges has dropped so low that the U.S. Department of Agriculture no longer counts them in Arizona totals. Tangerines are still produced, but in small quantities, at about a fifth of peak numbers.

Arizona has also been losing ground in competition with the other three citrus-producing U.S. states, Florida, California, and Texas. As recently as 2007, Arizona ranked second for production of lemons and third for tangerines. But, agricultural statistics from late 2013 show that Florida produced 63% of the U.S. citrus crop, followed by California with 34%. Texas and Arizona combined to produce only 3%.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Arizona produced 112 tons of citrus in 2010-2011, with a value of $38.4 million. While much less than in the past, citrus remains an important Arizona product.

Arizona citrus faces an uncertain future. The citrus industry in Yuma is declining also, although at a slower rate than the Salt River Valley. Continued urban development and farmers moving to other crops like dates and olives are problems for citrus. Arizona citrus farmers are also facing growing competition from other countries such as Brazil and Australia.

Citrus Facts ...

Citrus trees are evergreens. They stay green all year.

After chocolate and vanilla, orange is the world’s favorite flavor.

Grapefruit grows in clusters on the vine, like grapes. Hence, the name, grapefruit.

A single lemon tree can produce between 500 and 600 pounds of fruit in a year.

The tangerine is a variety of mandarin orange.

Significant lemon production in Arizona started in the late 1950s.
This is a lemon-picking scene in southern Arizona.
(Postcard courtesy of Al Ring)