

Anyone Growing Flying Dragons?

by Al Chomica

The Flying Dragon Orange, or *Citrus trifoliata*, is a small bushy citrus plant from northern China that is usually used as a grafting rootstock for other less hardy citrus plants like the Meyer Lemon. Twelve years ago, we bought a Meyer Lemon tree and planted it under the eave of our house facing a southeast direction. We were told by the nursery it could easily survive the winters living in the ground outside here on Vancouver Island. It grew for five years under the eave while we rented out our house. It grew slowly but it was always in leaf whenever we came by to conduct house inspections.

Then when I retired and moved here seven years ago I bought a Mandarin Orange from the same nursery on the mainland with the same assurance that it too would be happy to survive growing under an eave. As I developed our assortment of uncommon edibles that would grow into our food forest we now had two citrus plants growing in the ground. But then we conducted a garden tour with someone who was familiar growing Meyer Lemons in pots and they made comment that my Meyer Lemon and even my Mandarin were not what I thought they were.



The flattened branches were green with a waxy appearance and it had the most wicked-looking, serious thorns of almost anything I have seen. What on earth was I growing? The branches look like they are flying through the air with their undulating growth habit. And the thorns! Well, if one were to insert an arm into the bush they would likely become ensnarled with little hope of a bloodless escape. I'm guessing that must be why it is called a 'Flying Dragon' – it flies through the air and it will bite like a dragon.



I discovered that most of the citrus we can obtain on the west coast is grafted onto Flying Dragon rootstock because it is so hardy. In my case, the Meyer had obviously died back to ground level and the hardy Flying Dragon sprouted from the rootstock. Upon further examination, the mandarin orange I had bought had also died back and I was now the lucky owner of two Flying Dragon Oranges. The mystery was solved.

Early in April the plant sends out leaves that are a very bright yellow-green colour and they are three-lobed. This led me into an identification key on Citrus and it did not take long until I had a pretty good match with the Flying Dragon. At this point the tree was seven years old but had never flowered. It took the tree 10 years before it produced any flowers. There were only a few flowers at first that opened at least a month before the leaves did and I got one measly sour orange that was quite tart and yellow like a lemon.

In year 11 the tree sent out about 60 flowers. I saw mason bees visiting a few of the flowers but I hand-pollinated everything in my yard in year 11 because there were essentially no quantities of visible pollinators out at that time of year and the weather was quite blustery. I watched one mason bee who lived in a hole in our house about two feet away from the orange tree that she visited every hour or so. She only unplugged her hole for three days before it was sealed up again. We got about 15 sour oranges from the tree last year. We made homemade Caesar's from real clam/tomato juice and rimmed the glass with this strong lemon-flavoured citrus and celery salt. Pretty good, if I say so myself and we grew or caught everything except the vodka.



The small tree continued to grow more flying branches and I started to amend the soils with mulch and organic material. It put on a lot of girth for a small tree and has now developed a thick double trunk that is over four inches across. It is also starting to form furrows in the bark. And those wicked thorns are getting bigger and with more potential for harm every year. I did lose some blood when our kitten got stuck in the base of the tree and I had to extract her.

Year 12 was a turning point for the tree. There were at least 400 to 500 flowers. I had installed a slew of mason bee houses all around the garden and several times I could count five or six bees visiting the plethora of flowers. I did not hand pollinate a single flower this year.

I started off a foliar spray program for the citrus that is applied once a week at sunset when the stomata open and I can directly apply fermented plant nutrients into the plant that get utilized within hours. For citrus, one makes a fermented plant juice from citrus fruit that is sprayed on with a few other nutrients. It may just be the age of the plant but it certainly is vibrant this year.

Then I had a thought. If the rootstock is so vibrant and prolific perhaps I could graft different varieties of citrus onto my established Flying Dragon. So, I took a visit to the Nitty Gritty Greenhouse, over in Cedar, where Tanja with two green thumbs and a lot of generosity gave me scions from four different citrus trees she had growing in a greenhouse in pots. They were Meyer Lemon, Eureka Lemon, a blood orange and a lime.

I traded them for a bottle of my citrus foliar spray and grafted them onto the tree in late May. It will be very interesting to see if any of them catch.