Although we still face problems with citrus canker and citrus greening, many homeowners still like to grow their own citrus. Sweet oranges are very popular with many cultivars to select from. The selection at local garden centers is pretty good, but as you sort through various pots checking tags for names, you would probably like to know more about the individual varieties - their qualities and season for instance. Let's look at some common sweet orange varieties.

Oranges, like many tree crops, come in early, mid-season and late varieties. ‘Hamlin’ oranges, discovered in Deland, Florida, in 1879, are early-season producers that are ready to pick from about October through January. ‘Hamlin’ trees are very cold tolerant and generally are harvested well before any frosty weather threatens the fruit. The fruit store well on the tree and yields are very high. Splitting is however noted on the fruit from time to time. With six or less seeds per fruit, ‘Hamlin’ has a light color juice. Another early-season sweet orange is the ‘Parson Brown’. ‘Parson Brown’ is often ready to pick slightly before ‘Hamlin’. ‘Parson Brown’ is noted for their seediness and can have up to 30 seeds per fruit making it more difficult to eat as a fresh fruit. ‘Ambersweet’ is an additional early-season sweet orange that you might find available. Looking similar to a navel orange, ‘Ambersweet’ can vary in seediness, but is easy to peel and has good fruit and juice color making it good for fresh eating or juice.

The Navel orange is very different from other sweet oranges. The navel portion at the bottom of the fruit is actually a small second fruit embedded partially inside the larger fruit. While nearly seedless and easy to peel and section, it is known for its premature fruit drop. The juice should be used soon after squeezing, as a bitter flavor will develop if kept too long. One cultivar, ‘Cara Cara’ is a crimson-fleshed variety often used in fruit salads.

Moving into a mid-season sweet orange, ‘Pineapple’ is a good variety which has been around in Florida since 1860. With good color

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and internal quality, 'Pineapple' is harvested from December to February. Moderately seedy, 'Pineapple' is less cold hardy than the other sweet orange varieties. It also known to have a good crop one year followed by poor crop the next. Fruit drop can also occur in years of a heavy crop. 'Mid sweet' is ready from January to March. This sweet orange is very cold hardy and less apt to produce a fruit drop than 'Pineapple'. The yield and quality are on par with 'Hamlin' and the juice color is deeper orange.

The most notable late-season sweet orange is 'Valencia' which is available from March through June. Introduced into Florida in 1870 from either Spain or Portugal, this late orange will actually have two crops on at once with both current and past season's crop on the tree. This is perhaps the best sweet orange variety with excellent fruit and juice quality. With no more than six seeds per fruit, is takes about 15 months for a crop to mature. Alternate bearing, a good crop followed by a poor one, can occur with this orange.

Of course, if you have the opportunity, try several types of sweet oranges to see what you really like before you invest in a tree or two. As citrus comes into the market, select your favorite variety and search out a young tree at your local nursery or garden center.

Resource:

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