



## Growing Neem in California

Neem trees can be very happy growing outdoors in Southern California, but growers need to take special precautions to help them get through the transition from the jungle environment in our Central Florida greenhouse to your dry climate.

Prized in the Sahara for their cooling shade, neem trees will become very large over time. They can grow from four to eight feet per year under optimum conditions, so you need to carefully consider where you plant them.

Before you put a neem tree in the ground, however, help it acclimate to your hot, dry growing conditions. It does love full sun, but for best results put it in a pot with good soil in a spot where it gets early morning sun or dappled shade when you first get it. Water it in very well, then don't water again until the soil feels dry, even if the leaves are wilting. It's gone from the jungle humidity of my Florida greenhouse to your desert, and it takes a little getting used to. If you can't stand to watch it wilt, spritz the leaves with water or a weak solution of fish emulsion several times a day. If the soil is already wet, getting those roots wet again is the fastest, most effective way to kill it.

Once you see new growth, the tree has acclimated and you can transplant it into the ground. We haven't seen any problems with feeder roots moving horizontally, so it can be planted within six or eight feet of concrete foundations or sidewalks without any problems. In clay, try to dig a pretty big hole and back fill it with better soil. Mulch it well too, which I've heard breaks down the clay - there isn't much of that to experiment with in Florida.

If they prefer any particular soil pH, I haven't discovered it. The books say they won't handle salt, but they're doing just fine in Key West where the salt water table is about five feet below the ground. They do like a good layer of mulch and organic fertilizer.

If you get regular freezes, you'll end up with a giant neem bush. They freeze back to the ground at about 28, but I've seen them grow back from temperatures as low as 22. To get the tree shape back, pick one to three of the largest branches and keep pruning the side branches until it looks the way you want it to. Of course, if you're harvesting the leaf, all of those branches provide much more easy-to-pick leaf than a real tree.

Please call or write with questions or comments – and stay strong and healthy!

*Vicki Parsons*

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