

Growing Neem in Central Florida

A native of India, neem is an extraordinarily hardy tree that thrives in ecosystems ranging from the Sahara Desert to the wet salty environment of the Florida Keys. The only pests known to harm it are directly related to overwatering: slugs (which are mollusks not insects) and several strains of root rot.

In Florida and other tropical climates, neem quickly becomes a valuable shade tree, growing up to eight feet per year under optimum conditions. It will handle temperatures to about 30 degrees without damage and comes back from the ground after temperatures as low as 26. It also handles heavy weather exceptionally well, with trees in Key West now covered in new growth after four hurricanes in 2005 including a storm surge from Wilma that left them standing in salt water for more than 24 hours.

In areas where temperatures regularly drop below freezing, neem can be grown in a large pot and brought inside for the winter. Florida gardeners may simply turn the pot over and cover it at ground level, or coppice the tree at Thanksgiving, then cover it with a large clean trashcan when freezing weather is expected.

Neem trees grow best with regular fertilization. We recommend citrus fertilizer because requirements are similar. They also like a heavy layer of mulch although they'll grow happily in even the sandiest of soils.

Like many tropical plants, neem trees are day-length sensitive and stop growing in the winter unless supplemental light is provided, particularly if they are indoors. If you expect to harvest neem year-round, make sure your tree receives as much natural light as possible during the day, then several hours of artificial light at night during the short days of winter. It doesn't need to be much, a nearby living room light is fine.