

A HAPPY HOME

An unexpected gift taught LARA KRISTIN HERNDON that when life gives you lemons...you should water them.

"I'm sending you a lemon tree," said my mother, "to cheer you up." This was two years ago, when my bitter divorce was dragging on and on and I'd moved out of the high-rise apartment my ex and I had shared and into a small walk-up with our daughter. I felt like a shipwreck survivor—glad to have washed up on dry land, traumatized to be starting over from scratch.

A few days later, a package arrived. I opened it to find a beautiful green stalk sprouting several glossy emerald leaves. My first thought: It was the dead of winter in Manhattan—how would I keep this thing alive? But caring for the little tree proved easy; all it needed was water and a warm windowsill.

When it blossomed—white waxy stars with sunshine yellow centers whose sugar and honeysuckle scent my daughter and I gulped in by the lungful—our cramped apartment felt transformed. Encouraged, I hung pictures on the walls, bought new sheets and pillows, and even ventured out to meet a few neighbors.

The flowers dropped off in early March, leaving in their place tiny green lemons. In the months that followed all but one of those dropped off, too. The lone survivor grew and grew, bending the whole diminutive plant under its weight. We harvested our enormous lemon in August. It was sweet enough to eat whole, like an orange, but instead we made a small, delicious batch of lemonade that we drank on our stoop in the late-summer sun.

How to grow your own indoor lemon tree:

1. Choose the right plant. Meyer and Ponderosa trees do well indoors; look for the words indoor or dwarf when ordering (try logees.com or williams-sonoma.com).

2. Nourish it well. Lemon trees need lots of light and warmth. If you don't have a sunny windowsill, invest in grow lights.

3. Think big. Your tree may triple in size, so buy a larger pot than it initially needs. For more information, read the National Gardening Association's online guide to fruit trees in containers (garden.org).

