Growing A Survival Garden In The Desert

Guest post by Marcela De Vivo

Living in a desert area can increase the need for self-sufficiency, especially if you are miles from your nearest neighbours. Growing a garden not only provides you and your family with much needed food and nutrition, but it can also help improve your landscape and water retention. Desert plants in particular are a great way to reduce water use and maintenance. A garden can also draw in native wildlife, helping you create a small, natural, sustainable ecosystem.

The best time to start planting your desert garden is the fall. The soil is still warm from the residual heat from the summer, while the air temperature stays moderate with no extreme fluctuations to stress new plants. By the time the following summer rolls around, a strong root system will be established, giving plants strength to withstand desert summer’s heat.

Raised beds might be a necessity due to caliche soils—mineral deposits that harden into something more like concrete than soil—that can appear under regular desert soil. Additionally, the raised bed will help to keep your carefully fertilized and mulched topsoil in place.

One of the more complicated parts of gardening in an arid climate is getting the soil right for growing, but the rewards are definitely worth the effort. Soil in the desert usually consists mostly of clay and sand and contains little organic matter. Therefore adding compost and fertilizer is a must for desert gardens, especially for plants (like vegetables) that grow shallow roots.

(Creating a compost pile from kitchen scraps is also an efficient and self-sufficient way of reducing
waste and improving your harvest!

Mulching is also an extremely important as it helps the soil retain its water and keeps the upper layers of soil cool. Aim for a **three-inch layer of mulch** over the plants' root zones, which is the area right below the canopy and a little beyond to help maintain soil moisture. Using a crushed granite as top dressing can help to stabilize the plants and slow the loss of moisture.

It goes without saying that water will be a major factor in whether or not your garden flourishes. Even if you have a well, look for ways to conserve and use all water resources available to you. Rain-collecting barrels are an easy to maximize water supply for the garden.

Ideally, you should try to **grow your garden from seed**. Not only is it less expensive, but it also allows you to condition your plants to the challenging environment in which they will grow to maturity. If you are going to grow plants from seeds, use heirloom seeds. This allows you to save seeds from one year's harvest to plant a new garden in future years.

The type of vegetation you choose to plant also makes a difference in sustainability. Do some research regarding growing seasons and best plants to grow in your area. For sheer nutrition and desert-appropriateness, **cruciferous vegetables are an excellent choice**. They packed with vitamins, minerals, and fiber and they provide protection to a variety of cancers. Many cruciferous vegetables, like broccoli, kale, beets, cabbage, cauliflower, radishes, and turnips grow well in the desert, and fall is the ideal time to plant them.

**Companion planting** can also help improve the sustainability of your garden because it can reduce the need for pesticides. Additionally, some plants can enrich the soil with nutrients needed by others; others offer protection or shade.

Planting in shade or providing shade for you garden is also key. A food-friendly solution is to **plant fruit trees for shade**, so that they provide both fruit for your family and shade for the rest of the garden. The leaves also can go towards creating compost. Shade cloth is another option to protect your plants from the summer desert sun.

Be flexible about what you want to grow in your garden; trial and error will show you what will succeed in your particular patch of land and what will not. With each succeeding season, your soil quality, know-how, and plant choice will improve, and your harvests will become more bountiful.

**Marcela De Vivo** is a freelance writer in the Los Angeles area who also works with moisture-sensor manufacturers **Process Sensors**. She has written on everything from health & wellness, marketing and technology.

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