



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Cooperative Extension

Pima County - Master Gardener

Gimme Shelter Garden

Garden History

When we settled into our home west of Tumamoc Hill in the mid-1980s, the front yard held only a dangerously leaning saguaro surrounded by gray gravel, and the back offered two chinaberry trees—and little else. Over time, we transformed that sparse space into a lush, living habitat shared with the birds and wildlife that also call this desert home.

An early change was flanking the front yard with ocotillo rib fencing, echoing its form with a wavy wrought-iron fence along the sidewalk—open enough for neighborly conversations. Tall feather trees now rise behind them, creating high living walls that offer both shade and privacy while serving as favorite perches for visiting birds. For color, we've added purple Santa Rita prickly pears and pots of vibrant succulents that brighten the porch. In the back, the old chinaberry still stands, hosting carpenter bees and Gila Woodpeckers. A 10-foot trellis covered with cross vine and honeysuckle forms a protective green barrier along the western edge, giving smaller birds cover from Cooper's Hawks. Paths lined with pollinator plants radiate from the back door like spokes of a wheel, surrounded by garden art—birds and desert creatures mingling among flowers and the real wildlife that visits daily.

Garden Basics

Most plantings are on drip irrigation, supported by an active rainwater harvesting system that stores up to 5,000 liters from our roof. We rely on that water first, switching to city water only when needed. Many of our plants thrive with little extra care, though we mulch flower beds with pine wood chips to conserve moisture, enrich the soil, and discourage weeds. A lively population of lizards and birds serves as our natural pest control team.

Garden Philosophy

Our goal has always been simple: to create a desert oasis that offers food, water, and shelter. The *Gimme Shelter Garden* is a shared refuge—a place where wildlife and people find safety, color, and calm. Its ever-changing palette of blooms, birds, and buzzing life makes every season a joy and every moment outdoors a reminder that harmony and beauty thrive where living things find shelter together.