THE LITTLE GARDEN THAT COULD

3510 North Palmer Drive
Tucson, Arizona 85716

Topics: Active Rainwater Harvesting

Garden History

Our house was built in 1971. When we bought it in 1999, there were exactly two plants on the property: an arborvitae tree in the front yard and a male mulberry tree in the back. All was gravel and block wall. In the first year or two, we planted Santa Rita prickly pears and creosote bushes in the front and a grapefruit tree, an orange tree and native shrubs in the back. The little lemon tree was actually started from seed in a pot before we moved here. We soon added cat's claw and creeping fig vines to hide some walls and a little Aleppo pine, which is now the largest plant in the front yard.

As the mulberry slowly died, we continued to add native and non-native plants in the ground and in pots. The Vegetorium was built in 2013. This is planted with seasonal vegetables. In 2015 we had the porch across the back built and added flagstone to the “Secret Garden” on the south end. I call the north end the “Shade Garden.” The fan palm and native shrubs there are all volunteer, but I planted the six different ground covers: tradescantia, English ivy, frog fruit, periwinkle, asparagus fern and spider plants. I can also step out of my kitchen door and pick fresh herbs year round.

We have chosen not to remove the dead mulberry as it has provided years of support, through wind and storms, for the very tall tricocereus volunteer. There are now sixty-one pots on our little cul-de-sac property – all planted with herbs, succulents and flowers. I cannot stand an empty pot!!

Gardening Basics

Watering There are drip irrigation lines for the vines in front, the native shrubs along the back wall, the citrus trees and the flowering shrubs along the south wall. We use flood irrigation for the trees in front. The rain collection tank was installed in 2013 and is used whenever there is water in it. Everything else is hand-watered as needed – sometimes daily during the summer.

Soil The entire yard had black plastic under the gravel, which we removed as we planted. The soil is extremely hard and devoid of nutrients. I add worm castings, compost and bat guano at every opportunity. Thankfully, we have never encountered caliche.

Fertilizer I keep five kinds of fertilizer on hand: Arizona’s Best Organic for vegetables, for roses and for citrus, Miracle Grow Bloom Booster for flowers, flowering shrubs and ground covers and an all purpose fertilizer for when I run out of something.

Pest Control I am a big fan of Integrated Pest Management (IPM). I have cultivated a healthy colony of green lace wings and praying mantes to eat aphids, thrips and mites. I also keep a spray bottle of Dawn water handy at all times and hand-pick critters as I see ’em. I leave certain caterpillars alone so that we can enjoy the butterflies. We also have a large community of lizards who help with the bugs.

Gardening Philosophy

I take advantage of whatever comes my way: cuttings, seedlings, gifts, wildflowers, volunteers, etc. and propagate like crazy. Don't be afraid to try anything, but do your homework so that you know how to take care of it. Also, do something in your garden every day so that you always know what’s going on and can deal with any problems before they become too big!