

# Basic Elements of Garden Design

## Water Usage 'Once Established'

- Drought: 'Dry Summer'
- Deluge: Winter Rains and 'Wet Summer' Monsoons
- Water Harvesting: Passive or Active; Irrigation
- Xeriscape Plant Zones: Oasis, Transitional, Native/Dry

**Sun Exposure:** full sun and reflected heat, partial shade, shade

**Plant Hardiness:** both winter cold lows and summer heat highs tolerances

**Seasonal Interest & Color:** foliage, textures, flowers

## Trees & Shrubs

### Wildlife:

- creating habitats for birds, butterflies, pollinators
- repelling (rabbit resistant, deer, javelina)

**Living Outside:** sitting, cooking, eating, water features/pools, sports, sleeping

**Hardscapes:** Existing and to be Created

## Celebrate Low Water Native And 'Desert Adapted' Plant Types

Begin by selecting plants with similar growing requirements, especially water needs and sun exposure. Grouping plants with the same moisture needs will conserve water, reduce maintenance chores, and simplify irrigation schedules. It also promotes healthier root systems, which results in attractive, long-lived plants.

### Trees:

- Evergreen vs. Deciduous
- Thorns/Spines; Leaf Litter/Seed Drop
- Citrus/Stone Fruits

**Shrubs:** small, medium, large & vines

**Small Plants:** perennials, annuals, desert wildflowers

**Grasses:** ornamental vs. turf (cool & warm season or artificial)

**Groundcovers, Bulbs, Water Plants**

**Herbs & Edibles**

**Cacti And Succulents:** agave, yucca, aloe

### Resources

[www.amwua.org/plants](http://www.amwua.org/plants)

[www.southwestdesertflora.com](http://www.southwestdesertflora.com)

## Serendipity: Garden Design and Evolution

### Steps To Creating Outdoor Spaces

1. Make a 'Mind Map' or Wish List with "A", "B", "C" priority lists of plants, accessories, activities that you want in your garden.
2. On paper, draw a plan in pencil that shows your lot and house with any existing walkways, trees, walls, and slopes or grade changes.
3. Then lay a sheet of semi-transparent paper on top of the drawing to draw your 'Mind Map' of Bubbles/Circles (A-large, B-medium, C-small) that show where your ideas could go.
4. Use the position of the sun seasonally and through the course of the day to drive your design as you define outdoor living spaces and planting areas.
5. Consider the need for shade (to grow or build) and seating (built in or portable).
6. Research minimum space requirements and best orientation for sports features, pools, etc.
7. Draw in new hardscapes first, working generally from large to small features. Consider if and how you will enclose spaces with additional walls, trellises, pergolas/ramadas. These can be both functional and aesthetic.
8. Connect all the areas by a circulation pattern or routing paths. Pay attention to walkways and transition areas such as gates and steps/ramps. Widths no less than 3 feet if you use a wheelbarrow or want to walk two abreast.
9. Choose a theme and layout in harmony with your home's architecture and your aesthetics. For example: Straight Lines (Rectilinear) or Curvy Lines (Curvilinear). Carry out your theme throughout your landscape with similar hardscape materials choices, pot styles, colors.
10. Learn about the basic elements: water needs, sun exposure, and hardiness. Continue with your theme when selecting your plant palette and group your plants with THE BASICS in mind at the very least. Be aware that the Low Sonoran Desert has 5 Seasons: Winter, Spring, Dry Summer, Wet Summer/Monsoon, Fall.
11. Refer to local/regional references that provide cultural information such as signs at plant nurseries, plant lists, publications. Understand that a plant grown at a local, established Plant Nursery will probably tolerate and thrive in our Low Sonoran Desert better than a plant grown in another state and shipped into a local store. For example, 'Full Sun' for a plant grown in coastal CA is probably more like 'Morning/Partial Sun' here.
12. Space your plants, especially Trees and Shrubs, according to their mature width/diameter. You can always 'fill in' gaps with annuals until your 'foundation' plants reach maturity. Allow adequate clearance under windows and next to doors/gates, walkways, sidewalks, and driveways by using mature sizes when planting rather than having to prune the plant to fit in your space.
13. Decorate your garden as you would your home with objects that conform to the themes and colors of your garden.
14. Keep in mind that your landscape garden is a living, dynamic project that is never 'finished'. Like us, it is always evolving, maturing, and changing.

## Resources

- Landscape Plants for the Arizona Desert from the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association. Sections on Plants, Search Plants, Trees, Plant Combinations are very helpful. Available online [www.amwua.org/plants](http://www.amwua.org/plants)
- Yard Full of Sun, Scott Calhoun, Rio Nuevo 2005
- Cool Plants for Hot Gardens, 150 Water-Smart Choices for the Southwest, Revised, Greg Starr 2021