

## Desert Native Landscaping Guide

*Kirk Anderson, Curator of Gardens*

There are no better plants to help a landscape evoke a sense of place than the plants found growing in the area naturally. Landscapes do not have to be comprised entirely of native plants to be effective. Incorporating even a few indigenous plants can help bridge the ever-widening gaps between the natural open spaces on the valley floor and surrounding mountain slopes.

With help from our guide, you can create your own beautiful and functional native plant garden or landscape.

### Advantages

Plants from arid climates are superbly adapted to local climate, soil, water, and ecosystem conditions and, therefore, require less resource input.

- Adapted to harsh desert soils, natives require fewer chemical or natural soil amendments.
- A native garden will require **70-90% less water** than lawns and non-native plants.
- Native plants support local populations of birds, insects, and pollinators.
- Properly selected and sited trees can reduce cooling costs by 10 to 30%. Shade canopies can lessen the urban heat effect of our paved world.
- Natives are less prone to disease, insect infestation, or stress from weather conditions.

### Attraction

Water-efficient doesn't mean colorless. Native gardens can be attractive both in design and as habitat to local wildlife.

- There is an incredible variety of succulents and accent plants available for use – cacti, euphorbias, agaves, aloes, yuccas, nolin, dasylirions, and ocotillos.
- [Check out our Suggested Native Plant Guide](#) to see how to enliven your landscape!
- Staggered bloom times ensure continuous splashes of colors and provide critical resources for pollinators year-round.

### Spacing

Like the desert itself there should be informal spacing and separation of plants or groupings of plants that looks most natural.

- Use rocks and hardscape elements to embellish un-planted space.
- Rocks can fill voids and balance out a landscape where the temptation is to plant more plants- from boulders to cobble to decomposed granite.

### Maintenance

Along with planting drought tolerant species, the most critical step in reducing water use is managing the irrigation schedule, changing it with the seasons, and shutting it down when significant rain events occur. The right plants in the right spots should lead to minimal upkeep and pruning. Southwest plant material looks better allowed to grow naturally. When needed, selective pruning should be practiced rather than shearing. Eliminating the

weekly shearing reduces time spent on maintenance, reduces the amount of green waste produced and allows for greater flower production.

- Carefully manage your irrigation schedule, changing it with the seasons and shutting it down when significant rain occurs.
- Install low flow irrigation or retrofit existing systems.
- Water early morning to minimize water loss due to evaporation.
- If plants have varying water needs, group or zone them together so they can be irrigated separately. When everything is on one system you are always watering for the *least* drought tolerant plant.
- Removing spent flowers can help tidy up and encourage repeat blooming but remember many plants produce seeds that wildlife relish.
- Some plants that have become sparse with age can be rejuvenated with a hard pruning at the right time of year.
- Do not top trees. Topping destroys the natural shape of the tree and promotes weak branching that may become a liability down the road.
- Suspend use of herbicides and pesticides. Few insecticides are target specific and kill as many or more beneficial insects as pests.

### **Water Conservation**

- A remarkable 70 – 80% of domestic water use goes to landscapes and gardens. Real savings can be made by planting arid-adapted plants which need less water. For the most efficient water use, install low flow irrigation and retrofit existing systems. Drip irrigation is the most water efficient method. If landscaping with plants of varying water needs, group them together so they can be irrigated separately.
- Water Use Classification of Landscape Species (WUCOLS) is [available online](#) to help identify water needs of plants. Coachella Valley is Zone 6.
- Consider Smart Irrigation – controllers are linked to satellite feeds, allowing daily adjustment according to current conditions.
- [CVWD website](#) offers examples of seasonal irrigation schedules.

### **Pitfalls to Avoid**

- Save water and plant loss by planting late September through March.
- Consider exposure orientation. For most desert plants an eastern exposure is heaven, a western – not so much. For plants along west-facing walls or near light-colored surfaces that reflect heat and light, use plants that can handle it.
- It's critical to get water to the roots – ensure bubblers are upslope from the plant and that water is getting to the plant and not channeling off somewhere else.
- Know the ultimate size of a plant, especially when it comes to the relationship between spines, thorns, and walkways.
- Digging deep and adding amendments to the hole is not recommended.
- If using an organic mulch that stays wet keep it off the stem or trunk.
- Avoid fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*), which can be invasive and problematic to natural habitats. If already present, remove it. Replace with a grass native to the Southwest. Replace with one of the grasses native to the Southwest or use one of the purple or red cultivars of *Pennisetum* that do not set viable seed.