The 7 Most Common Desert Gardening Mistakes

and How to Avoid Them



"Gardening in the desert isn't hard. But it *is* different."

Gardening in the desert can be daunting. We definitely have our challenges -- "death-star" sun, temperature extremes, drought, wind, and rock-like soil to name a few.

But look around and you can see that there are literally thousands of plants that thrive under these conditions. With 3,500 native plants, the Sonoran Desert is the most biodiverse desert in the world.

And we undoubtedly have some of the most interesting and iconic plants on the planet. *Who doesn't love a saguaro?*

Every spring, visitors from around the world flock to the desert to witness our spectacular wildflower displays.

Yet a lot of gardeners will complain that "nothing grows here". Clearly this is not true!



So if you're having trouble with your garden there are two main issues.

First, you may be trying to grow plants that aren't well-suited to grow in the desert or in their microclimate.

Or you haven't quite mastered how to take care of the plants you have. I understand, I've been there, and it's not your fault!

Most gardening "rules" and advice are not meant for hot, dry climates. The bulk of gardening information available is irrelevant for the desert.

That's why I created Southwest Gardener. As a botanist, science writer, and life-long gardener, I love helping fellow desert dwellers make their gardens beautiful, low-maintenance, and a joy rather than a source of stress.



The information in this guide is meant for everyone -- from avid gardeners to anyone who simply wants to have an attractive yard and not spend a fortune on water bills and landscapers.

Here are the top 7 mistakes I see gardeners and homeowners make in their desert landscapes. Don't feel bad if you've made any of these. I learned much of what I know through years of trial and error, and by learning from the mistakes of others. And now you can learn from mine!

Mistake #1

Believing "Full Sun" Plant Labels



Most plants you buy will have a label that clearly indicates their sun exposure preference. Unfortunately, plant labels are not always accurate for the desert Southwest, particularly if you shop at big box stores that sell the same plants everywhere.

Many plants labeled as “full sun” won't survive *our* sun. "Full sun" usually means someplace that doesn’t have any. 😉

The sun here is powerful! Too much sun and your plants will fry, no matter how much you water them.

Here most plants, even those considered "full sun," prefer some shade in the summer.

When I first moved here I was surprised to learn that even cactus can get sunburned and appreciate a little shade.



That's why many cactus, including the Sonoran Desert's iconic saguaro, start their life in the shade of a nurse tree.

Be particularly wary of reflected heat, that kind that occurs when the sun bounces off a house, wall, driveway, or window. This kind of heat is unnaturally bright and hot. Even native plants growing in the wild don't face that additional burden.

Using my infrared thermometer gun, I've measured the temperature of a block wall and found it can easily reach 180°F on a hot sunny day. 😧

So view any "full sun" label with some suspicion. That plant might prefer a little shade.

Mistake #2
Assuming “If It’s Sold Here, It Will Grow Here”



Just as you can’t believe “full sun” labels, you also can’t believe that plants you see at nurseries are meant to grow here.

You might think that if a plant is sold at a local nursery or garden center, that it will actually survive and thrive in your area. That’s a reasonable assumption... but sadly, that’s not the case.

Some nurseries are better about this than others. At one end of the spectrum, there are nurseries that specialize in selling only desert-adapted or native plants. These nurseries have a mission and are top sources of plants that will thrive in your area. They are also excellent sources of information about the plants they sell.

On the other end are big box stores which will carry whatever they think their customers will buy. Their inventory is decided by corporate headquarters who don't understand our region.

Unfortunately, some nurseries and especially big box stores stock plants that look gorgeous at the time of sale but will never look that good again. These plants are grown in greenhouses under ideal conditions and have been treated with fertilizers and hormones to get that plant to peak at just the right time.

Then you get it home, and it starts its decline immediately, making you feel like a bad plant owner. It's not your fault. That plant was destined to fail.

So the next time you're lured into making a spontaneous purchase of some plant that catches your eye, remember this mantra:

> "Just because a plant is sold here,
> doesn't mean it will grow here."

Before you make any significant purchase -- tree, shrub, or expensive succulent -- it pays to learn about that plant before you buy. Choosing the right plant can save you time, money, and disappointment.

Mistake #3
Planting the Wrong Time of Year



There's a gardening rule of thumb that spring and fall are the best times to plant. That holds true in temperate four-season climates. But, like most gardening advice, it's not meant for the desert Southwest — things are different here!

Here, fall is by far a better time to add new landscape plants to your garden. Here are some of the reasons why.

The spring planting season in the desert is short. You can still have freezes in February. And then before you know it...

it's *hot*, *dry*, *and windy*. It may leave you wondering, "*What the heck happened to spring*?" 🤔

If you've gardened elsewhere, it can be a shock to learn that...

- There are no "April showers". It's not unusual to go 3 months without rain in spring.
- The first 100-degree day can occur as early as March.
- Hot, dry June is our most challenging month for plants. (In some places, nice weather is just getting started.)

Spring is unforgiving. It's upsetting when you forget to water or put up shade *just once*, and now your new plants are toast. 😢

Fall, on the other hand, is easier on plants, even if there's a late heat wave. The days are getting shorter, the nights are getting cooler, and the sun is getting less intense.

When you plant in fall, your plants have 3 full seasons to get established and grow new roots before facing the blast furnace heat of the summer. In spring, there's only a few weeks.



Mistake #4
Watering: Too Little, Too Often



Learning how to water properly is key for gardening success.

I've lived in 5 homes in Tucson and every time I've moved into a new house, the irrigation was set to the *same* default watering schedule -- every 3 days for 20 minutes. *And that is absolutely the wrong way to water!*

Once plants are established, they should be watered deeply but infrequently. This builds strong, deep root systems and healthy, resilient plants.

How often and how long to water a plant depends on a few factors:

- What kind of plant is it? Native, desert-adapted, or tropical? Tree, shrub, perennial, or succulent? They all have different needs.
- What time of year is it? Plants' water needs change with the seasons.
- How big is your plant? Plants need more water as they grow.



Figuring out your plants' water needs
takes some effort, but it's worth it.
You'll find everything you need to know in
Landscape Watering By The Numbers.

Mistake #5
Growing Plants That Outgrow Their Space



Growing plants that eventually gets too big for their space is one of the most common mistakes desert gardeners make.

Shrubs that outgrow their space become a maintenance nightmare. They need constant pruning and wind up looking unattractive at best, and half-dead at worst.

A case in point is Texas rangers (*Leucophyllum spp.*). Few desert plants suffer more "pruning abuse" than these beautiful shrubs.

When allowed to take on their natural form, Texas rangers are gorgeous. But they are frequently planted where they don't have adequate space to reach their full potential.

Consequently, they are regularly sheared into balls, cupcakes, and other unnatural forms, turning this lovely plant into an eyesore.

Here are two Texas rangers side-by-side. The one on the left has been left to grow naturally. The one on the right has been badly pruned into a green box.



Shearing like this cuts off developing flower buds, destroys this shrub's health, and can eventually kill it.

Trees that grow too large for their location are particularly problematic. Branches can fall on houses and cars while the roots can damage driveways, sidewalks, sewer lines, and foundations.

Overgrown cactus, agaves, and other spiky plants can be dangerous when they hang over sidewalks, driveways, patios, or anywhere else humans or pets might come in contact with them.

Mistake #6
Trying to Grow High Maintenance Plants



What constitutes a high-maintenance plant is subjective. Only you know how much care you're willing to give a plant. Some gardeners like to push the limit to see what they can grow here. They don't mind pampering their plants or losing a few when things don’t work out.

But if you're like me, I want easy wins! I want plants that look good without a lot of fuss. I want plants that make me happy and don't stress me out.

You won’t go wrong planting natives. Plants native to the desert Southwest have a huge built-in advantage -- they are perfectly suited to live here. They’ve evolved to withstand our intense sun, temperature extremes, drought, pests, wind, and alkaline soil.

Not sure which plants are native?
You'll find a list of natives that make excellent landscape plants in our **Desert Plant Library**.

Your next best choice should be desert-adapted plants.

These originate in dry, hot areas with similar environmental stresses, but they are not from the desert Southwest. Many desert-adapted landscape plants grown here are from Australia, Africa, or the Mediterranean.

A third choice are the somewhat high-maintenance plants that originate from the subtropics.

These plants tolerate desert high temperatures, but are usually not as frost-proof as native plants.

They also need more water, are more prone to pests and diseases, and require regular fertilizer to thrive.

Some popular plants that fall into this category include citrus trees, roses, gardenias, and hibiscus.



Mistake #7
Not Hiring Qualified Professionals



Anyone with a truck and a few tools can all themself a "landscaper". Unfortunately, an untrained person can wreak havoc on your landscaping in a single visit.

Some of the more egregious problems you might experience include butchered shrubs and trees, and plant damage from improperly applied herbicides. Your plants may even contract witches' broom, a contagious disease spread from plant-to-plant and yard-to-yard by landscapers' infected tools.

You would never hire a plumber, car mechanic, or hairstylist that had no credentials, so don't hire unqualified garden help either! They might save you money today but will cost you in the long run.

If you've planted any new trees in the past few years, I urge you to consider hiring an arborist for a check-up. They will correct any potential problems, and properly prune your trees to get them off to the best possible start.

A tree should be a thing of beauty that brings life to your garden and makes you happy. A healthy tree is an investment that should increase the curb appeal and value of your home.



The consequences of planting a tree — whether positive or negative — can last for decades. If not planted and maintained properly, a tree can become an eyesore or nuisance that will cost you big bucks when it eventually needs major work or to be taken down.

You can find certified arborists in your area using the International Society of Arboriculture search function. You can also check on an arborist's credentials there, too.

Learn more about the value of hiring an arborist to check your trees here.

Final Thoughts:
Don't Forget Where You Live



My final piece of gardening advice is never forget where you live. The Sonoran, Mohave, and Chihuahuan Deserts of the American Southwest are among the most unique environments on earth.

So try to roll with the desert rather than struggle to turn it into something that it's not.

If you've gardened elsewhere, it can be a shock to find that the most fundamental gardening rules don't apply here. So to be a successful desert gardener, you have to let go of previously-held ideas and be open to learning new ways of doing things.

You are not alone on this endeavor -- Southwest Gardener is here to help!

About the Author

Deane Alban is the creator of Southwest Gardener. She is a science writer with a bachelor's degree in botany from the University of South Florida. Gardening is her lifelong passion. She's been gardening in Tucson for over 16 years.



"To appreciate nature in the arid West, you have to get over the color green; you have to quit associating beauty with gardens and lawns."

-- *Wallace Stegner, Author, environmentalist*