

Complete Tucson Homeowner's Xeriscaping Guide

Right Plant, Right Place, Right Budget

Based on analysis of 215+ drought-resistant plants across Tucson's diverse microclimates

Prepared by: Rachel Beeson Date: July 2025 © 2025 Rachel Beeson. All rights reserved.



STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR YARD ZONES

Walk Your Property and Map These Areas:



EXTREME HEAT ZONES

Locations: South-facing walls, west-facing slopes, driveways, gravel areas, metal/stucco surfaces **Conditions:** Blazing afternoon sun, reflected heat, rapid soil drying **Plant Needs:** Heat Lovers (83 plants available)



MODERATE ZONES (EASIEST TO PLANT)

Locations: East-facing walls, transition areas between house and yard, areas with morning sun/afternoon shade **Conditions:** Variable sun, some natural protection **Plant Needs:** Heat Tolerant (109 plants available - most options!)



COOL ZONES (MOST CHALLENGING)

Locations: North-facing walls, under trees, under ramadas/porches, enclosed patios **Conditions:** Limited direct sun, cooler temperatures **Plant Needs:** Heat Sensitive (23 plants available)



STEP 2: DETERMINE YOUR BUDGET

Budget Categories & What You Get:



BUDGET GARDENS (\$30-150 for 10 plants)

Plant Options: 160+ choices at \$3-15 each **Best For:** First-time xeriscapers, seed/small plant gardens, large areas **Examples:** Desert wildflowers, native grasses, groundcovers

MODERATE GARDENS (\$160-400 for 10 plants)

Plant Options: 40+ choices at \$16-40 each **Best For:** Mix of foundation plants and accents, balanced landscapes **Examples:** Native shrubs, small trees, specimen cacti

INVESTMENT GARDENS (\$410+ for 10 plants)

Plant Options: Premium trees and rare specimens **Best For:** Statement pieces, mature landscapes, long-term value **Examples:** Large native trees, architectural agaves, rare desert plants

STEP 3: CHOOSE YOUR WATER INDEPENDENCE LEVEL

Water Use Categories & Annual Costs:

RAINFALL ONLY (54 plants available)

Water Needs: Zero irrigation - thrives on Tucson's 11-14 inches annual rainfall **Annual Water Cost:** \$0 after establishment **Best Plant Examples:**

- **Extreme Heat:** Desert Sand Verbena (\$3-5), Gregg Catclaw (\$17-31)
- **Moderate Zones:** Desert Rosemallow (\$10-17), Mexican Cliffrose (\$16-29)
- **Cool Areas:** Apache Plume (\$10-22), Desert Willow (\$12-85)

DEEP WATERING EVERY 2-3 WEEKS (102 plants)

Water Needs: Minimal irrigation during establishment, then monthly deep watering **Annual Water Cost:** 50-75% less than traditional landscaping **Best Plant Examples:**

- **Extreme Heat:** Rock Hibiscus (\$11-22), Florida Hopbush (\$16-35)
- **Moderate Zones:** Arizona Cypress (\$17-90), Canyon Grape (\$11-24)
- **Cool Areas:** Coralbells (\$10-17), Little Bluestem (\$8-18)

WEEKLY WATERING (59 plants)

Water Needs: Regular irrigation but still drought-resistant **Annual Water Cost:** 25-50% less than traditional landscaping **Best For:** Transition from traditional to xeriscaping, highest reliability

STEP 4: COMPLETE PLANT RECOMMENDATIONS BY ZONE

EXTREME HEAT ZONES (Heat Lovers - 83 Plants Available)

South-facing walls, west-facing slopes, driveways, gravel areas

BUDGET OPTIONS (\$3-15):

Groundcovers & Wildflowers:

- Desert Sand Verbena (\$3-5) - Purple groundcover, Feb-Jul blooms
- Indian Blanket (\$6-10) - Red/orange wildflower, classic desert beauty
- Desert Needlegrass (\$3) - Ornamental grass, architectural
- Bahia (\$3-5) - Yellow daisy-like flowers
- Desert Marigold (\$5-10) - Year-round yellow blooms

Small Shrubs:

- Cliff Fendlerbush (\$10-22) - White mock-orange flowers, Mar-Jun
- Desert Ceanothus (\$12-22) - Blue/white flower clusters
- Brittlebush (\$8-14) - Yellow daisy flowers, silver foliage
- Four O'Clock (\$8-16) - Fragrant evening blooms
- Fairy Duster (\$8-14) - Pink powder-puff flowers

Cacti & Succulents:

- Barrel Cactus species (\$8-14) - Architectural specimens
- Prickly Pear varieties (\$8-18) - Yellow flowers, edible fruit
- Cholla species (\$8-22) - Dramatic branching structure
- Desert Willow (\$12-85) - Orchid-like flowers

MODERATE OPTIONS (\$16-40):

Shrubs & Small Trees:

- Florida Hopbush (\$16-35) - 8-month bloom season, heat champion
- Gregg Catclaw (\$17-31) - Native acacia, Apr-Oct fragrant flowers
- Desert Ironwood (\$38-90) - Purple flowers, extremely long-lived
- Palo Verde varieties (\$18-75) - Arizona's state tree, yellow blooms
- Ocotillo (\$22-65) - Dramatic red-tipped branches
- Jojoba (\$16-34) - Evergreen shrub, valuable oil nuts

Agaves & Yuccas:

- Century Plant (\$10-40) - Dramatic architectural specimen
- Parry's Agave (\$14-30) - Compact, beautiful blue-gray
- Joshua Tree (\$24-75) - Iconic desert statement piece
- Soaptree Yucca (\$14-65) - Tall white flower spikes

DESIGN TIPS:

- Plant in clusters of 3-5 same species for visual impact
- Use larger plants as anchors, smaller ones as fillers
- Consider mature size - these plants can get large!



MODERATE ZONES (Heat Tolerant - 109 Plants Available)

East-facing walls, transition areas, morning sun/afternoon shade

BUDGET OPTIONS (\$3-15):

Wildflowers & Perennials:

- Desert Rosemallow (\$10-17) - 9-month bloom champion, hibiscus family
- Coral Bells (\$10-17) - Pink/red flowers, shade tolerant
- Frosted Mint (\$10-18) - Fragrant silver foliage, culinary use
- Desert Lupine (\$4-7) - Purple flower spikes, nitrogen-fixing
- Penstemon varieties (\$7-13) - Tubular flowers, hummingbird favorites
- Ghost Plant (\$4-8) - Succulent groundcover
- Autumn Sage (\$7-13) - Red flowers, deer resistant

Native Grasses:

- Buffalo Grass (\$4-10) - Lawn alternative, extremely drought tolerant
- Blue Grama (\$4-12) - Ornamental bunch grass
- Curly Mesquite (\$6-13) - Dense groundcover grass
- Little Bluestem (\$8-18) - Beautiful fall color, 7-month interest

Small Shrubs:

- Turpentine Bush (\$7-15) - Yellow flowers, aromatic
- Paperflower (\$7-12) - Long-blooming yellow daisies
- Globemallow (\$7-13) - Orange cup-shaped flowers
- Chuparosa (\$8-16) - Red tubular flowers, hummingbird magnet

MODERATE OPTIONS (\$16-40):

Foundation Shrubs:

- Arizona Cypress (\$17-90) - Evergreen structure tree, blue-green foliage

- Arizona Madrone (\$18-50) - Red bark, white flowers, berries
- Manzanita varieties (\$18-30) - Pink urn-shaped flowers
- Sumac varieties (\$17-32) - Fall color, wildlife value
- Barberry (\$18-29) - Thorny security plant, yellow flowers
- New Mexico Locust (\$18-43) - Pink flower clusters, nitrogen-fixing

Vines & Climbing Plants:

- Canyon Grape (\$11-24) - Native grape, edible fruit, fall color
- Virgin's Bower (\$10-26) - White fragrant flowers

Medium Trees:

- Nettleleaf Hackberry (\$18-95) - Shade tree, wildlife value
- Texas Red Oak (\$36-98) - Fall color, acorn production
- Arizona Oak varieties (\$34-110) - Native shade trees

INVESTMENT PIECES (\$41+):

- Blue Spruce (\$45-170) - Cool mountain native, blue needles
- Arizona Sycamore (\$44-125) - Large shade tree, beautiful mottled bark

DESIGN TIPS:

- This is your "Goldilocks zone" - most variety, longest blooms
- Perfect for foundation plantings and main landscape areas
- Mix evergreen structure plants with seasonal bloomers



COOL ZONES (Heat Sensitive - 23 Plants Available)

North-facing walls, under trees, enclosed patios, shade areas

BUDGET OPTIONS (\$3-15):

Shade Perennials:

- Apache Plume (\$10-22) - 8-month bloom season, fluffy seed heads
- Coral Bells (\$10-17) - Coral flowers during monsoon season
- Pink Alumroot (\$14-24) - Shade-loving perennial, pink flowers
- Frosted Mint (\$10-18) - Thrives in partial shade

Native Grasses:

- Blue Grama (\$4-12) - Tolerates shade, ornamental seed heads
- Rough Bentgrass (\$3-5) - Cool-season grass for problem spots
- Pine dropseed (\$8-18) - Graceful arching grass

Small Shrubs:

- Fendler's Ceanothus (\$4-8) - White flowers, nitrogen-fixing
- Woods' Rose (\$13-28) - Native rose, pink flowers, red hips

MODERATE OPTIONS (\$16-40):

Shade Trees & Large Shrubs:

- Desert Willow (\$12-85) - Orchid-like flowers, hummingbird magnet
- Arizona Walnut (\$32-60) - Native nut tree, large shade
- Chokecherry (\$18-32) - White flower clusters, edible berries

Specialty Plants:

- Southwestern White Pine (\$8-16) - High-elevation native conifer
- Mountain Mahogany (\$16-29) - Silvery seed plumes
- Oregon Grape varieties (\$16-29) - Blue berries, yellow flowers

DESIGN TIPS:

- Focus on texture and foliage - fewer flowering options
- Use native grasses for movement and sound
- Layer different heights for visual interest
- Consider seasonal interest from seed heads and berries



WATER-WISE COMBINATIONS BY ZONE:



RAINFALL ONLY GARDENS (Zero Irrigation Needed):

Extreme Heat: Desert Sand Verbena + Brittlebush + Barrel Cactus **Moderate:** Desert Rosemallow + Buffalo Grass + Turpentine Bush

Cool Areas: Apache Plume + Blue Grama + Fendler's Ceanothus



MINIMAL WATER GARDENS (Monthly Deep Watering):

Extreme Heat: Palo Verde + Fairy Duster + Desert Marigold **Moderate:** Arizona Cypress + Penstemon + Little Bluestem **Cool Areas:** Desert Willow + Coral Bells + Woods' Rose



COLOR-FOCUSED COMBINATIONS:

Spring Color: Lupine + Penstemon + Palo Verde **Summer/Monsoon:** Desert Rosemallow + Chuparosa + Globemallow **Fall Interest:** Sumac + Little Bluestem + Canyon Grape **Winter Structure:** Arizona Cypress + Agaves + Yuccas



STEP 5: SEASONAL PLANNING CALENDAR



SPRING PLANTING (BEST TIME)

Plant: Almost everything! Spring offers ideal establishment conditions. **Focus:** Get summer bloomers established before heat arrives.



SUMMER CAUTION

Plant: Only if you can provide extra water during establishment. **Focus:** Maintain existing plants, plan for fall planting.



FALL PLANTING (SECOND BEST)

Plant: Trees, shrubs, cool-season plants. **Focus:** Establishment before winter, ready for spring growth.



WINTER PLANNING

Activity: Plan next year's additions, order plants, prepare soil. **Bonus:** 4 plants actually bloom in January for winter interest!



STEP 6: SHOPPING & SOURCING GUIDE



LOCAL NURSERIES (93% of plants available):

- **Spadefoot Nursery** - 60+ species available, native specialists
- **Civano Nursery** - 50+ species, good variety
- **Desert Survivors** - 40+ species, rare natives
- **Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum** - Seasonal plant sales, expert advice



ONLINE/SEED SOURCES (18% of plants):

- **Native Seeds/SEARCH** - Heirloom desert varieties
- **Special order through local nurseries** - Most can order specific plants



SHOPPING STRATEGY:

1. **Start with local availability** - easier establishment, local expertise
2. **Plan for seasonal availability** - some plants only available certain times
3. **Buy smaller plants** - better establishment, lower cost

4. **Consider seeds for large areas** - budget-friendly for wildflower meadows
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STEP 7: BUDGET PLANNING EXAMPLES

STARTER GARDEN (500 sq ft): \$100-300

Strategy: Focus on budget plants, mix of sizes **Plant List:**

- 5 Budget groundcovers (\$3-10 each) = \$15-50
- 3 Budget shrubs (\$10-15 each) = \$30-45
- 2 Moderate accent plants (\$16-25 each) = \$32-50
- **Total plants:** \$77-145 + soil prep + installation

FAMILY GARDEN (1,000 sq ft): \$300-800

Strategy: Mix budget and moderate plants, 1-2 statement pieces **Plant List:**

- 8 Budget plants for coverage = \$80-120
- 5 Moderate shrubs/perennials = \$80-200
- 2 Investment trees = \$90-200
- **Total plants:** \$250-520 + installation

SHOWCASE GARDEN (1,500+ sq ft): \$800-1,500

Strategy: Mature plants, premium specimens, professional design **Plant List:**

- Mixed budget plants for background = \$150-300
 - Premium shrubs and accents = \$400-600
 - Statement trees and architectural plants = \$300-600
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SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

FAMILY-SAFE OPTIONS (61% of plants)

Completely non-toxic to humans and pets:

- Desert Rosemallow, Apache Plume, Cliff Fendlerbush
- Coralbells, Frosted Mint, Desert Ceanothus
- All native grasses, most wildflowers

CAUTION REQUIRED (6% of plants)

Toxic if ingested - keep away from children/pets:

- Oleander, Castor Bean, some Euphorbias
- **Use in background areas** or avoid entirely

PHYSICAL HAZARDS (Clearly Marked)

Spiny plants - consider placement:

- All cacti and agaves - beautiful but need safe placement
 - Place away from walkways and play areas
 - Great for security/barrier plantings
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SUCCESS TIPS

START SMALL

- **Begin with one zone** and expand gradually
- **Learn what works** in your specific conditions
- **Build confidence** before tackling challenging areas

WATER ESTABLISHMENT

- **Even drought-resistant plants need water** during first year
- **Deep, infrequent watering** encourages deep root development
- **Mulch heavily** to retain moisture and suppress weeds

SOIL PREPARATION

- **Tucson caliche is challenging** - improve drainage
- **Add organic matter** sparingly (desert plants don't need rich soil)
- **Test pH** - most desert plants prefer alkaline conditions (which Tucson has naturally)

BE PATIENT

- **Desert plants grow slowly** but live long
- **Year 1:** Establishment
- **Year 2:** Growth
- **Year 3+:** Mature beauty and minimal maintenance

WHEN TO GET HELP

DIY-Friendly Projects:

- Small areas (under 500 sq ft)
- Budget plant installations
- Adding plants to existing landscapes

Consider Professional Help For:

- Large areas requiring grading
- Complex irrigation installation
- Soil amendment for severe caliche
- Tree planting and placement
- Complete landscape design

Educational Resources:

- **University of Arizona Extension** - Free xeriscaping classes
- **Desert Botanical Garden** - Plant identification and care
- **Local water utility rebate programs** - Financial incentives

YOUR XERISCAPING JOURNEY

Remember: Xeriscaping isn't about creating a cactus garden (unless you want to!). It's about choosing beautiful, water-wise plants that thrive in Tucson's climate while reducing your water bills and maintenance time.

With 215+ plant options available, you can create any style:

- **Cottage garden** with native wildflowers
- **Modern minimalist** with architectural agaves
- **Colorful oasis** with blooming shrubs
- **Wildlife habitat** with bird and butterfly plants

Start with your easiest zone (east-facing areas), choose plants you love, and remember - every desert plant you add is a step toward a more sustainable, beautiful, and budget-friendly landscape.

Happy xeriscaping!   