

Beginning a garden can be overwhelming for anyone, but when you add living in the desert to the mix, things feel extra out of reach. If you try to research it and look for all the answers upfront, you'll never get started. Part of the problem is there are SO many theories out there and everyone swears that their way is the only way but then they are all contradicting each other which leaves you with no clue where to begin. My goal is to try to simplify things as much as possible and just give you a manageable amount at a time...something I wish I had when I had started a few years ago!

After years of trial and error we now have a successful garden with a variety of fruits and veggies as well as our own composting area, but we didn't get to this point overnight. I definitely am not claiming to have all the answers; I'm still learning and researching and making tweaks to our garden with each season of growing, and I think most gardeners will tell you the same thing, because there are always new things to learn. So don't think too far into the future; instead, let's just take this one step at a time and help you become a gardener in the desert! Let's get started!

Phase 1: At a Glance Checklist

- ☐ Get a garden journal
- ☐ Choose a location for your future garden & take note of the amount of sunlight it gets
- ☐ Begin prepping the soil (if you plan on planting directly in the ground)
- ☐ Make your garden bed(s)
- ☐ Start planning for the watering system you will use

Keep reading for a detailed list that will explain each step. Contact me for any questions or clarifications needed. You've got this!

Phase 1: Detailed Checklist

☐ **Get a journal, or start a note on your phone**

Things to keep in mind:

- If you're like me, you won't always stay on top of this, but it is useful at the beginning and I still pull it out at the beginning of each new growing season for reference or to map out that season's garden
- I use a grid notebook which helps me with planning out the layout of the garden which we'll get to later, but any notebook would work fine. I will say that if you love clean lines & drawing to scale, a grid notebook is probably the right choice for you

☐ **Choose a location for your garden**

Things to keep in mind:

- You can always create shade for your beds, but it is much harder to create sun for it, so choose a place where it will get at least a few hours of sun each day. This is when gardening in the desert works to your advantage, because you can plant on the east side of your house and still get enough sun for most, if not all plants.
- It's a good idea to take a couple days to keep an eye on the area you are considering to put your garden...how many hours of sun does it get? Which time of day does it get sun?
- If you don't have one larger area to put a bed, or couple of beds depending on what you want, consider putting it throughout your landscape and places where you could add some smaller containers. If you plan on going this route, take note of how much sun each part of your yard gets.
- Take measurements of the area you plan on using so you can start thinking about what size beds you want

- There are very few areas, if any, where you can't plant in AZ. As long as it doesn't get too much shade, we have solutions for you if your garden is getting too much sun.

☐ **Begin prepping the soil**

Things to keep in mind:

- **THIS STEP IS ONLY FOR THOSE PLANTING DIRECTLY IN GROUND.** If you are wanting to make garden beds move to the next item on the list and save prepping soil for Phase 2 (which will be the end of the summer)
- Buy some amend, perlite, and soil from the store. (See pics at the bottom for guidance)
- Break up the ground as much as possible
- We removed about 6" (we have a pile on our side yard we're slowing chipping away at until we look into someone coming and picking it up) & then we loosened another 6" & that is what we mixed with amend, perlite, and new soil. Right before planting you will top off your area with a mixture of soil, amend, perlite, and fertilizer which will make up for that 6" that you removed.
- Once you have your soil loosened, add some amend and mix together, then add perlite and mix well, and lastly add some soil and mix well. Wet it down a bit and mix again.
- Every couple of days (I'd say minimum of a couple times a week, but the more you do it, the lighter it will be) you'll wet it down and mix it again to make sure it doesn't get compacted again. When I say wet it down I mean get the surface wet and then mix it up. You don't want to soak it and make create a mud pile. Just enough to get the top wet and then toss it like a salad. Add more amend and perlite as needed. After each monsoon you'll ideally want to get out there and loosen soil before it becomes too hard and compacted. We usually assign kids to this and then tell them they can jump in the pool after. Win/win! :)

- adding fertilizer is a great option if you are prepping the ground in Fall or Spring, but not as effective to use during the most extreme weather months. With that being said, we have had times where it has been needed during those months and it definitely doesn't kill your garden, it just takes different amounts to make it as effective. If you are prepping in the summer, I would wait and add fertilizer when you plant the garden.
- DON'T add cow manure fertilizer if you plan on planting your garden in the next 6 months. Chicken poop also needs to break down for months before it can be added to the garden. Bunny and guinea pig poop can be added directly into your garden/soil.
- The earlier you start, the more time for the soil beneath where you're working to start breaking down & soften. With that being said, we have had times we have done this & immediately planted & we've never had any major issues, so that is definitely an option. Don't let not starting early enough stop you! In fact, you might prefer it, just make sure you loosen the dirt a minimum of a foot

☐ **Make your garden bed(s)**

Things to keep in mind:

- Plan on building one or two beds to start with and make sure the placement is in a location where you can easily add to the space as you get a hang of gardening.
- We have an array of sizes in our garden: 4x8, 4x4, and 2x8 and find there are pros to each size. Choose a size you feel comfortable with for now and know you can add more beds later and play with different sizes. You really can't go wrong here!
- You can make your bed by using screws and an electric drill to screw together some pine boards (we use 2"thick boards that are 8'L and 12"H) or you can buy garden cinder blocks which

you use as the corners and each plank of wood just slides right into the grooves. (See pic below) This is a great option to start while you're still figuring out sizes that work for you.

- See pics below of our beds and the "tops" we created to help us need less lattice for climbing plants, as well as allows us to put a shade cloth over the top during the summer months and cloths over during the winter to prevent freezing. This is not necessary, especially at the beginning of your gardening journey, but something you might want to keep in mind. This is something you can still add later so if you choose to not do it right away, just know you can always add it down the road.
- If you are making your own wood beds you'll want to seal them. I used Pure Tung Oil, but there are various options of food grade wood sealants you can choose from
- Here is a great option for a precut garden bed you just need to assemble if you are overwhelmed with purchasing your own wood and making your own cuts.
- If you're back and forth between sizes, maybe look into the watering system below, and if you want to go that route, it might help you make your decision.

☐ **Start planning your watering system**

Things to keep in mind:

- You will NOT need to install anything during this phase but I included it here in case it is something you need to start budgeting for. You will want to have everything on hand ready for set up as soon as you plant this fall
- I HIGHLY recommend you use THIS grid system or something similar
- Not properly watering is probably the number one reason people in the desert struggle to grow a garden. Having a way to set a timer and know everything will get watered during the

right time of day (more on when that is to come) is a HUGE advantage and will help ensure your success.

- Watering with a can is very rarely effective to keep a plant thriving. That works great when you are first starting to get things to sprout, but keeping the plants well watered down where the roots grow as the plant get bigger is a job for a dripper of sorts...slower longer watering. These grids are great for that.
- Make sure whatever watering/sprinkler system you decide to use, it is not something that will wet your plants. You want it to water near the base of the plant without actually hitting the plant itself whenever possible.

Contrary to what you may read other places, I think it's important to be open to different brands and find what works for you. We have tried brands people swore by and we didn't think it was worth the cost, and on the flip side, we have had times people have said they hate a brand but we had a lot of success with it. Listen to everyone's opinion and take it into consideration, but be open to trying different things and figure out what works for you and your garden. Below is a collage of products that have worked for us!



These unique cinder blocks can be found in the gardening section of Home Depot or Lowes. We used these at the beginning of our grading journey while we figured out what size beds we liked. Highly recommend for beginners!



An idea from Lowes website of what you can create with them!

You really just need to make sure your soil is compatible with gardens. Perlite and Amend are probably good from any brand so get what works with your financial situation.

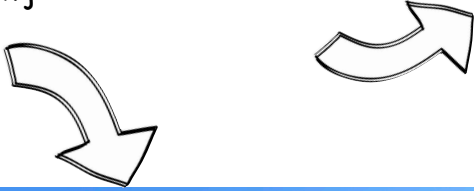


Just some of the brands we have used over the years. It may be that the more expensive the soil the easier it is to work with, but we have had successful gardens with the cheaper stuff and never had problems adjusting the soil as needed. From what I gather, no matter what you use you will eventually be adding different elements to balance your soil. More on this to come!



One of the brands we were told to stay away from by some, but we have had great success with their amend

Our shade structure. We use the top slats to tie up plants until they are tall enough to wrap around the top themselves. cover with a black shade cloth in the winter to prevent freezing and white shade cloths in the summer to prevent burning. More on this to come!



Our grid watering system. Our garden really took off when we started using this!

