

12 Earth-friendly strategies for your Tucson garden

Gardeners can do our part to reduce our environmental impact and even benefit our wildlife and ecosystems. Here are 12 easy ways to do that. And the bonus is that it will save you both money and effort! For more details, check out the article at tucne.ws/efgardens or follow the QR code.



7 Limit outdoor lighting use

It can adversely affect both plants and animals. Effects range from changing plant fruiting and blooming times to adverse effects on bird migration, animals and insect populations. Use dark-sky friendly outdoor lighting and turn it off in the evenings, and use motion sensors for security lights that switch off after a set period of time. The International Dark-Sky Association has some great resources and can take you through the steps to improve your outdoor lighting.

10 Use compost and organic fertilizers

Natural manures such as chicken manure can be used instead of artificial fertilizers, which are not as nutritious for your plants, and tend to damage the microbiome of the soil. Artificial fertilizers also require a lot of fossil fuel energy to produce. Your own compost is best but you can also get locally produced compost at Tank's Green Stuff.

11 Reuse or return your nursery pots

Black plastic pots are difficult to recycle. Desert Survivors, Mesquite Valley Growers, Bach's Cactus, Rillito Nursery and Garden Center, Spadefoot Nursery and EcoGro are among the local nurseries that take these pots back and reuse them.

12 Don't use gas-powered garden equipment

Lawn mowers and leaf blowers emit lots of air pollutants and carbon dioxide as well as the lethal gas carbon monoxide. They also emit toxins such as benzene and large numbers of particulates which the World Health Organization has blamed for poor respiratory and cardiac health. A half-hour of leaf blower use emits as much pollution as driving a pickup truck for 3,900 miles, or from Texas to Alaska! If you have a landscaping company maintaining your yard, consider asking them not to use leaf blowers.

Resources

- City of Tucson rebates: tucsonaz.gov/water/rainwater-harvesting-rebate and tucsonaz.gov/water/gray-water-rebate
- Reducing water use tips: tucsonaz.gov/files/water/docs/homeowner.pdf
- Integrated pest management: tucne.ws/ipmgarden
- International Dark-Sky Association: darksky.org
- Rainwater harvesting information: www.harvestingrainwater.com/

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1 Reduce your water use

As much as 70% of our treated residential drinking water goes to landscape plants. You can reduce this by harvesting rainwater, using greywater, and planting desert-adapted and native plants. The City of Tucson offers rebates for installation of rainwater harvesting systems and greywater systems. The city also has a helpful brochure on reducing your water use at home, which includes outdoor watering tips.

2 Plant natives

These plants are adapted to our climate and will require the least water and other resources, again saving you money. A huge bonus is that they also support our wildlife, particularly the small animals that form the backbone of our ecosystem. A number of nurseries in our area sell native plants, including Desert Survivors, Spadefoot Nursery, Tohono Chul greenhouse and Borderlands Restoration.

3 Plant trees

Trees, particularly native ones, have tremendous benefits to both you and to wildlife. Planting a shade tree can make it 25 degrees cooler under the tree in an urban environment. The tree also reduces the air temperature around it by 9 degrees. Trees help manage excess water falling on a property by slowing down the rainfall with their leaves and branches, soaking up excess water with their roots, and helping to create better soil underneath their canopy (which leads to better moisture retention in the soil). Appropriately placed trees around your house can reduce cooling bills by up to 50%. They can also serve as windbreaks, protecting your house and reducing heating bills. In addition, trees can reduce air pollution.

4 Don't use pesticides

Many systemic pesticides stay in the plant and in the environment for months to years. Neonicotinoid pesticides, in particular, are linked to mass die-offs of bees and other beneficial insects. They have concerning health effects on vertebrate animals such as birds, deer and other animals. Practice integrated pest management to control any pests in your garden, and keep your plants healthy — that's their best defense against pests. You can get plants and seeds that haven't been treated with pesticides at the following places:

- Spadefoot Nursery: spadefootnursery.com
- Tohono Chul greenhouse: tohonochul.org/retail-greenhouse

They source their plants from different growers; ask the nursery staff which ones are safe for pollinators

- Borderlands Restoration: borderlandsplants.org
- Native Seeds/SEARCH is a great source of wildflower seeds: nativeseeds.org
- Westwind Seeds: westwindseeds.com

5 Mulch and leave the leaves

Your yard will benefit greatly from the leaf mulch and plant debris, so consider just sweeping and raking it under your trees so it can nourish the soil and tiny organisms that live in it and support the entire ecosystem. It will also reduce the temperature of the soil around your house and protects the soil from losing lots of water to evaporation, making it easier for plants to survive. In addition, organic mulches and leaves provide habitat for tiny soil dwellers and insects. You can get mulch in bulk and often for free from your arborist. You can also simply use your own leaves and yard debris.

6 Use permeable paving

This allows water to be absorbed into the soil beneath the hardscaping rather than flowing off and adding to the millions of gallons that end up in our rivers and water treatment plants. Urban water runoff not only contributes to water waste and flooding, it also results in water pollution. You can use pavers, bricks, gravel and other similar materials instead of impermeable concrete and asphalt.

9 Buy supplies in bulk

This will save you money as well as reducing your plastic use. Plastic

8 Don't use peat moss

Peat moss is used in many gardening products such as potting soils to add acidity and bulk to soil and to increase its water-holding capacity. Peat is mined from wetlands, and is not a renewable resource. The wetlands take thousands of years to recover, and for all intents and purposes that ecosystem is gone forever. The process of mining the peat moss also releases greenhouse gasses (such as methane) into the atmosphere. Coconut coir is a very sustainable alternative. Check the labels on your gardening products carefully.

