



## Summer desert garden

You can grow anything, anywhere, at any time. You can, if you have unlimited resources which so few of us do.

In southern Nevada, we have virtually unlimited sunshine, but little else. Very little water, excessive heat, and strong winds, we do have. That does not mean one is stuck with no garden, even in the Mojave. Success with plants in the desert depends mainly on preparation and time, and less on spending large amounts of money.

It looks as if this spring will not be an extended one; hence summer will probably be early, and no cooler than last year. Preparation consists of more than rototilling a planting area, although that can be very helpful. There is a short list of essential items.

Choosing the right plants for a particular time can make the difference between achievement and disaster. Relatively few plants thrive when temperatures are in the triple digits; any that do cannot help but be popular. These include most melons (cantaloupes, watermelons, canary, etc.) and their cousins, pumpkins, which will grow through the summer and be ready for Halloween. Sweet potatoes planted in May can be harvested around Thanksgiving. For those who wish to create a genuine gumbo, okra will flourish through the summer. Nopales, spineless cacti, will obviously grow very well in high heat.

The down side of these terrific options, aside from the nopales, is that they require relatively large amounts of water. Melons are particularly thirsty and will not tolerate a water shortage. Clearly access to irrigation is important for any garden in the Mojave Desert, but we must recognize that water is a limiting factor here. Las Vegas received a grand total of 1.81" of rainfall, less than ½ of a normal year's precipitation, through all of 2014.

The situation is not hopeless, despite the drought.

Preparation includes more than plant selection and setting up an irrigation system. The growing medium itself should be part of a water-thrifty garden. Much of the soil in the Southwest is salty, infertile, either too heavy or too sandy.

Whatever the growing situation, large or small area, large planting pot, raised bed or in the ground, the soil must be as good as it can be. A good garden soil is about 5 percent organic matter but local soils often contain less than one fiftieth of that amount. Amending the soil by incorporating compost into the top three or so inches improves fertility, workability, and both drainage and water holding capacity.

Another practice that should be associated with a water-conserving garden is mulch. People might think of mulch as a decorative way to keep down the weed population, which is true, but it can do so much more. Under a layer of bark, straw or even rock, the soil remains cooler. The cooler soil means there will be less evaporation from its surface, saving water.

While people might not want to stay outdoors when temperatures rise, with preparation certain vegetables can be made comfortable and productive no matter how hot it gets!



Watermelon grown at Cooperative Extension's Outdoor Education Center

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