

Top 20 Plants for Low Desert Gardens



While there are hundreds of desert-adapted shrubs, groundcovers, perennials and accent plants available for use in low deserts, here are a few favorites. Here are the criteria we used to narrow the field: First, they all perform exceptionally well in our summer heat, and are considered water-efficient. They are so easy to grow and maintain that even gardeners with black thumbs will be successful. The list includes plants with different forms, flower colors and bloom periods, to help you create attractive combinations.

Agave desmettiana

This fast-growing accent plant resembles Octopus agave, but is smaller in stature, to about 3 feet tall and wide. Its soft, fleshy leaves are light green, with smooth edges and a stout terminal spine. While it can tolerate full sun and reflected heat, it looks more attractive in filtered shade. *Agave desmettiana* needs well-drained soil, and can be planted in the ground or in containers. Like most agaves, it blooms only once, and then dies. However, blooming doesn't occur for many years, and the plant produces an abundance of small "pups", to keep the population going. This species is cold hardy to 25° F.

Agave vilmoriniana (Octopus agave)

The arching and twisted leaves that give Octopus agave its name are light green and fleshy, with no thorns or spines. It is a favorite accent for high traffic areas such as entries, patios, and the perimeters of swimming pools. Octopus agave quickly forms a loose, open, single

rosette to 6 feet tall and wide. At the end of its life cycle, it sends up a spectacular spike of golden flowers. It is cold hardy to about 20°F.

Asclepias subulata (Desert milkweed)

Don't be put off by the unflattering common name of this terrific plant. Desert milkweed has a strong vertical form, forming a 4-foot clump of leafless, flexible silver-grey stems. Unusual clusters of creamy yellow flowers crown each stem from spring through fall, attracting butterflies to the garden. Tuck desert milkweed in among boulders, interplant it with herbaceous shrubs and perennials, or grow it in a container. This clean plant is also ideal for use around swimming pools. Desert milkweed thrives in full sun and reflected heat, and needs good drainage. It is hardy to 23° F.

Baileya multiradiata (Desert marigold)

This tough little perennial produces large, bright yellow daisy-like flowers in the spring, summer and fall. The blossoms are carried far above the silver-grey foliage on slender stems. Topping out at 12 inches tall and wide, Desert marigold is ideal for tucking into tight planting spaces. Plant it in full sun, and in a soil with excellent drainage. Desert marigold will rot out easily if over-watered. It is often used in combination with other native perennials, but is also spectacular in a mass planting. It is cold-hardy to about 10° F.

Great Performers in our Summer Heat!



Penstemon parryi

Caesalpinia pulcherrima (Red bird of paradise)

This shrub is without a doubt the most popular summer bloomer in the Valley of the Sun. From May through August this tropical-looking shrub produces loads of spectacular flower clusters. Red bird of paradise drops its leaves in the winter, and usually suffers some frost damage. In the early spring, after the danger of frost has passed, you should cut this shrub back to 6 to 12 inches above the ground. As soon as the weather heats up, it will explode into growth, growing to 5 to 6 feet tall and wide in one summer. It performs best in full sun and well-drained soil.

Calliandra californica (Red fairy duster)

If you enjoy the antics of hummingbirds, be sure to include a few Red fairy dusters in your garden. Their bright red, tufted flowers provide year around color and nectar, although the showiest displays are from spring through fall. Red fairy duster has ferny green foliage, and an open irregular form that lends itself well to natural landscapes. Mature plants might reach a size of 4 to 6 feet tall and wide. Temperatures below 25° F can cause some twig damage. Any shaping or pruning should be done in the late spring, but be careful not to overdue it, as too much pruning will inhibit flower production!

Cordia parvifolia (Littleleaf cordia)

Have you ever noticed a large shrub along the freeways that appears to be covered with pieces of white tissue paper? Littleleaf cordia, sometimes affectionately called the toilet paper plant, blooms on and off from March to October with masses of delicate white flowers. Littleleaf cordia forms a rounded mound to about 6 feet tall and wide, with stiff, arching branches. This tough shrub is very tolerant of drought and reflected heat, and is hardy to about 18° F. It requires virtually no maintenance. Plant Littleleaf cordia in full sun and well-drained soil. Use it as an informal screen, or as a backdrop for smaller desert shrubs. When the temperatures soar, just looking at the crisp white flowers will make you feel cooler.

Dalea frutescens Sierra Negra™ (Black dalea)

Because it is a rare fall bloomer, Black dalea is an indispensable ingredient for Phoenix landscapes. In the late fall, it is covered with masses of intense purple flowers that provide a striking contrast for our many yellow-flowering plants. Evergreen in the Phoenix area, this shrub forms a rounded mound of fine-textured grey-green foliage to 4 feet tall by 5 feet wide. Plant Black dalea in full sun, well-drained soil, and be careful not to over-water. It is hardy to about 10° F. Bees converge on this shrub during the bloom season.

Dalea greggii (Trailing indigo bush)

If you are looking for a long-lived, durable ground cover that will require almost no maintenance, *Dalea greggii* is the plant for you. This tough ground cover thrives in full sun and reflected heat locations, forming a dense silvery mound to one foot tall by 4-6 feet wide. Trailing indigo bush is a great choice for steep banks, or other areas where erosion control is needed. Trailing indigo bush is notorious for looking scraggly in nursery containers, but don't let that discourage you from trying it. Just be careful not to mix this ground cover with water-loving plants, as it is susceptible to rotting out if over-watered. *Dalea greggii* is hardy to about 15° F.

Eremophila species Valentine™

Winter-blooming shrubs are uncommon, and to find one with showy pink-red flowers is a dream come true! Valentine™ blooms from January through March with masses of red flower buds that open to form hot pink, fuchsia-like blossoms. For the rest of the year, this evergreen shrub provides deep green foliage and a dense, rounded form. Plant Valentine™ in full sun and well-drained soil, and allow it plenty of room to develop, as it can quickly grow to 4-5 feet tall by 5-6 feet wide. It is cold hardy to the mid-20's F.

Euphorbia biglandulosa (Gopher plant)

Strange and wonderful, this unusual shrub looks like something from another planet, but is native to the Mediterranean. Its arching, spreading stems are lined with linear, fleshy grey-green leaves. Broad clusters of chartreuse flowers appear at the branch tips in late winter and early spring. This shrub can reach a mature size of 3 feet tall by 4 feet wide. After flowering and fruiting, the stems die back, leaving a clump of grey-green foliage near the ground. It is hardy to at least 5° F, and is tolerant of full sun and reflected heat exposures.

Hesperaloe parviflora (Red yucca, yellow yucca)

Hesperaloe parviflora, one of the toughest and most carefree plants on the market, also produces one of the most spectacular flower displays. From late spring through summer, 4 to 5 foot tall stalks of red or yellow flowers provide intense color, as well as nectar for hummingbirds. Try combining red and yellow flowering selections together for a candy cane effect. The stiff, leathery leaves form a clump to 3 feet tall and wide. Plants thrive in full sun and reflected heat, and are hardy to well below 0° F. *Hesperaloe parviflora* also makes a great container plant, and is a clean choice for pool areas.

Hymenoxys acaulis (Angelita daisy)

Angelita daisy is one of our best perennials for year around color. Although blooming slows down in the winter months, it can still be counted on to provide a splash of sunny yellow in Phoenix gardens. It is very similar in appearance to Desert marigold (*Baileya multiradiata*), but has green foliage instead of grey. The slender, bright green leaves form a clump to 10 inches tall by 15 to 18 inches wide. Daisy-like flowers are perched above the foliage on tall, leafless stems. Angelita daisy makes a great low border plant, and should be planted in clusters or masses for the greatest impact. Although it is less susceptible to rotting out than Desert marigold, irrigation should still be monitored carefully. Plant Angelita daisy in full sun and well-drained soil. Remove spent flower spikes periodically to initiate new flower production and keep the plants looking fresh. Angelita daisy is cold hardy to 0° F.

Leucophyllum laevigatum (Chihuahuan sage)

It is impossible to imagine a xeriscape without Texas rangers. These tough shrubs are mostly evergreen, very low-maintenance, and thrive in the hot, muggy monsoon season. Often called barometer plants, their spectacular flower displays coincide with periods of high humidity. A favorite species is *Leucophyllum laevigatum*, or Chihuahuan sage. It has a wonderful relaxed, spiky growth habit that blends well with our Arizona natives. Periodically throughout the summer and early fall, it explodes into bloom with fragrant lavender flowers. It is a reasonable size for most gardens, to about 4 feet tall by 5 feet wide. Plant Chihuahuan sage in full sun and well-drained soil, and be careful not to over-water. It is hardy to 10° F.

Muhlenbergia capillaris Regal Mist™

In the fall, mass plantings of this ornamental grass can literally stop traffic! In October and November, Regal Mist™ is covered in a haze of pink flower spikes. It has narrow, dark green, glossy leaves that stay green from spring through fall. Winter dormancy can turn the flowers and foliage a warm wheat color, although in warmer areas of the Valley it is almost evergreen. The foliage forms a dense rosette to three feet tall and wide, with the frothy flowers adding another 1-2 feet of height in the fall months. Use Regal Mist™ in bold sweeps, nestled up against boulders or low walls for a softening effect, or around water features and swimming pools. This fast-growing plant should be cut almost to the ground in late winter or early spring to remove the brown leaves and spent flowers. While it will survive with very little water, it needs ample irrigation to look its best in the hot summer. Although full sun exposures will generate better blooming, this grass is also tolerant of filtered shade. Regal Mist™ is hardy to at least 10° F.

Muhlenbergia rigens (Deer grass)

Deer grass has been used in desert landscapes for many years, and is still a favorite. Compared to Regal Mist™, it has wider, bright green leaves that give it an extremely lush appearance, even when the summer heat is intense. Deer grass forms a clump of foliage to 4 feet tall and wide. In the fall it produces tall, slender tan flower stalks that rise two

feet above the foliage. The contrast of the tan spikes against the lush green foliage is extremely striking. Its cultural requirements and suggested uses are the same as for Regal Mist™.

Nolina microcarpa (Beargrass)

Long-lived and maintenance-free, Beargrass is a great choice for armchair gardeners. This grass-like plant forms a large clump of narrow, leathery green leaves to 5 feet tall by 6-7 feet wide. Beargrass produces almost no litter, and is a great choice for planting near swimming pools or fountains. However, be careful of the finely toothed leaf edges, as they can inflict some nasty cuts. The fibrous white curlicues at the tips of the leaves are extremely ornamental. In the summer it sends up a tall stalk of greenish-white flowers. Beargrass is adapted to full sun or part shade and well-drained soil. It is cold-hardy to at least 10° F.

Penstemon species

No desert garden is complete without a few penstemons! In the spring and early summer these perennial wildflowers produce tall flower spikes ranging in color from pink to red to purple. These hardy plants thrive in our arid climate with minimal supplemental irrigation, fertilizer, or maintenance. As an added bonus, the bright tubular flowers are irresistible to hummingbirds! You probably won't notice penstemons until they bloom. Most penstemons form a dense rosette of long, narrow leaves, which hug the ground and blend into the landscape. But in the spring and summer glorious flower spikes emerge from these little mounds of foliage. Place penstemons in full sun, or under the light shade of desert trees. Plant them in well-drained soils and be careful not to over-water. There are many different species of penstemons suitable for planting here in Phoenix, and mixing several species together can produce a kaleidoscope of color. Here are three of the best: *Penstemon eatoni* (Firecracker penstemon) features rich red flowers on 2-foot-tall spikes, from February to April. *Penstemon parryi* (Parry's penstemon) has 3-foot-tall stalks of hot pink flowers from March to early April. *Penstemon superbus* (Coral penstemon) sends up 6-foot-tall spikes of vivid coral flowers in March and April.



Muhlenbergia rigens (Deer grass)

***Ruellia peninsularis* (Desert Ruellia)**

Although Desert ruellia is frequently planted along streetscapes and freeways, its beauty is best appreciated up-close and personal. The deep blue flowers and interesting white-grey stems are difficult to appreciate at 50 miles an hour! This evergreen shrub has a naturally rounded form, growing quickly to 4 to 5 feet tall and wide. Its small, glossy green leaves provide a wonderful backdrop for the one-inch-wide blue flowers. The peak bloom period occurs in the spring and early summer, but sporadic flowering can continue throughout the year. If planted in a frost-protected area, Desert ruellia requires almost no maintenance. However, temperatures in mid-20's F will cause damage, requiring some pruning in the early spring. Plant Desert ruellia in full sun to maintain a dense form.

***Verbena goodingii* (Goodding's verbena)**

There are several species of verbenas that thrive in the Phoenix area. A favorite is our native species, *Verbena goodingii*. Its gorgeous lavender flowers compliment many of our native perennials, such as Paper Flower, Desert Marigold, Brittlebush, Blackfoot Daisy, and Penstemons. In the spring, this plant puts on quite a flower show, but blooming tapers off as the temperatures rise. *Verbena goodingii* forms a soft mound to 1 foot tall by 3 feet wide. Don't be alarmed if your plants look scruffy, or die out completely in the summer. This species is short-lived, but re-seeds in the garden. Once your population is established, you should have new plants filling in the bare spots each spring. It is visited by many species of butterflies during its bloom season.



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