



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Cooperative Extension

Pima County - Master Gardener

Rocky Oasis

Garden History

Built in 2004 on 1.3 rugged acres of hillside in the Tucson Mountain foothills, the property was dominated by surface rock, caliche, and very little soil. When we relocated from Colorado in 2012, the existing landscape featured native palo verde, ironwood, and mesquite trees along with jojoba, creosote, and other hardy desert plants. The garden area consisted mainly of rocky slopes on the east and west sides of the house and a large dirt parking lot with two ironwood trees on the east side—where we envisioned our main outdoor living space.

Our goal was to create multiple “rooms” or destinations that could be enjoyed throughout the year, each blending with the natural terrain and seasonal changes. Rocks were laid on the slopes, retaining walls and gabions were built, and garden zones and pathways took shape. From that rough beginning, the *Rocky Oasis* has evolved into a series of peaceful spaces that invite both people and wildlife to pause, explore, and thrive within the desert landscape.

Garden Basics

Watering: Water conservation and xeriscape principles guide every design choice. The garden is divided into planting hydrozones: an oasis closest to the house, an intermediate or transitional zone, and an outer natural or arid desert area. Passive systems—berms, swales, and low gabion walls—capture rainfall and direct it where it’s most needed. Active rainwater harvesting adds to the supply, with tanks holding 1,300 gallons from the house roof and 200 gallons from the greenhouse. This stored water supports lower-level gardens and an orchid greenhouse. Oasis beds and containers are watered with a drip system or hose three times a week during the hottest months, once a week in spring and fall, and as needed in winter.

Soil: Native and desert-adapted plants in the transitional and natural zones grow directly in native soil with rock mulch. The oasis gardens near the house, planted with flowering perennials and annuals that attract butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds, are enriched with compost and mulched with wood chips that slowly improve the soil. Container plants grow in carefully mixed blends of compost, coir, perlite, pumice, and vermiculite—adjusted for the needs of annuals, succulents, and cacti.

Fertilizer and Pest Control: During the growing season, flowering plants receive a balanced 20-10-16 fertilizer every two weeks. Following Integrated Pest Management principles, no insecticides or herbicides are used. Caterpillars are gently relocated to host plants so they can complete their life cycle, while aphids and whiteflies are managed with Safer’s soap. The result is a healthy, balanced ecosystem that thrives without chemicals.

Garden Philosophy

“We come from the earth, we return to the earth, and in between we garden.”

The *Rocky Oasis* celebrates resilience and renewal—of plants, people, and place. What began as a rocky hillside has become a sanctuary of life and color, where each stone and bloom reflects the beauty of working with the low Sonoran desert environment.