

GARDEN DESTINATIONS

Tucson: Growing in the Desert Southwest for Over 4,000 Years

by Jacqueline Soule



San Xavier del Bac is one of the missions established in Tucson by Father Kino, a Jesuit missionary, in the 17th century.

Tucson, once called “Chuk Son” or “base of the black hill,” has been a popular travel destination for millennia. It was first visited by travelling bands of hunter-gathering peoples. Roughly 4,000 years ago, the “Early People” began gardening near the springs. The springs are dry now, and “Chuk Son” has spread out a tad, but it is still a delightful travel destination for plant lovers. The greater Tucson area has ample gardens and charming garden sites to visit—places that are unlike anywhere else on earth.

Planning to come here? You can use your favorite search engine and find gardens like **Tohono Chul Park** (<https://tohonochul.org>), **Yume Japanese Gardens** (www.yumegardens.org), and **Tucson Botanical Gardens** (<https://tucsonbotanical.org>). Your engine might also find **Saguaro National Park** (www.nps.gov/sagu/index.htm), where you can learn more about these desert giants. But I want to share with you the singular gardens, the ones where

you will experience something unique, the ones that search engines often miss.

INSIDER'S ATTRACTIONS

The mission gardens are a horticultural salute to our regional history. When Father Kino, a Jesuit missionary, was exiled to Southern Arizona over 300 years ago, he found many thriving Native communities. He worked with these Native peoples and constructed missions—thriving communities that included schools, hospitals, and extensive agriculture to feed the residents. Kino ensured that both traditional and European crops were grown (need those grapes for sacramental wine after all). **Mission Garden** celebrates this history with plantings of herbs, fruits, vegetables, and native forage plants, all laid out in a charming, gardenlike setting. (www.missiongarden.org)

One of the missions Father Kino founded was **San Xavier del Bac** in 1692. If you visit this “White Dove of the Des-

ert” at the edge of Tucson, be sure to stop at the **San Xavier Cooperative Farm** (www.sanxaviercoop.org), just east of the mission. Here you will find regional treats like dried cholla buds, tepary beans, and mesquite flour, as well as a selection of freshly harvested seasonal produce.

The **Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum** is a living museum with a plant collection carefully curated to represent virtually all the plants and animals from across the Arizona–Sonora region. Don’t miss plants like the incomparable boojum, glowing palo blanco, organ pipe cacti, and so many more. (<https://desertmuseum.org>)

A visit to the **University of Arizona Pima County Cooperative Extension Gardens** (<https://extension.arizona.edu/pima-county-master-gardener-demonstration-garden-tours>) offers 14 gardens in one location. These gardens feature native, non-native, and drought-tolerant plants, plus showcase various planting, irrigation, and composting



The Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum is a showcase for regional native plants.

methods for desert horticulture—methods you might find useful as world weather patterns shift. Visit on your own, or book a tour for Wednesday or Saturday. While there, visit the **Tucson Village Farm** (<https://extension.arizona.edu/tucson-village-farm>), which helps local youth learn about growing food.

The **Mt. Lemmon Scenic Byway** offers a drive from the valley floor to the top of one of Arizona’s tallest peaks. It can be botanically compared to a trip from Arizona to Canada. There are ample pullouts and stops with breathtaking views. The mountain is named for botanist Sarah Lemmon, who in 1881 became the first white woman to reach its peak. Stop at

Molino Basin in the winter months and you may see the golden *Tagetes lemmonii*, a perennial also named for Lemmon, in bloom. (www.fs.usda.gov/coronado)

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

The greater Tucson area is large and getting around can be challenging during the crowded winter season. Here are some local attractions that may be close to where you are staying.

Sabino Canyon has a year-round stream and a visitor center with an interpretive garden of native plants, especially featuring ones that bloom in winter, when many people visit. The tram ride is a relaxing way to tour the canyon.



Located in Coronado National Forest, Mt. Lemmon, one of Arizona’s tallest peaks in the Santa Catalina Mountains, offers incomparable views.

UNIQUE NURSERIES

The Tucson climate is ideal for growing succulents, and there are many nurseries that specialize in them. If you can grow these amazing plants where you live, you’re sure to find something wonderful to add to your garden.

Desert Survivors Nursery is proof that horticulture therapy works wonders. The nursery employs adults with disabilities to grow a diversity of species that are found within 500 miles of Tucson. (www.desertsurvivors.org)

Spadefoot Nursery, named for the desert-dwelling spadefoot toad, features native plants rarely cultivated elsewhere. (www.spadefootnursery.com)

Rillito Nursery has been offering locally grown plants for close to 40 years. An herb garden showcases sturdy varieties for our tough climate. (www.rillitonursery.com)

(www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/coronado/recarea/?recid=75425)

Steam Pump Ranch is named for the first steam pump in the Arizona territory, used to irrigate fields. An interpretive garden includes reconstructed plantings and housing of the Native people. (www.orovalleyaz.gov/Government/Departments/Parks-and-Recreation/Facilities/Steam-Pump-Ranch)

Agua Caliente is a natural desert oasis teeming with native plants and wildlife. Guided tours are based on volunteer availability. (<https://friendsofaguacaliente.org>)

The Tucson region is one of the most ecologically diverse places on earth. The number of avian species alone that live here or migrate through is astounding—and human “snow birds” are pretty plentiful, too! We hope you will come visit us and plan for a long stay. ■

Tucson resident Jacqueline Soule, PhD, is an award-winning garden writer who has authored over a dozen books and many articles. Her website is gardeningwithsoule.net.