

Why are so many Phoenicians gardening? How do you do it successfully?

TAYLOR: Have you ever met someone who was so incredibly passionate about something, that it actually made you jealous? Has it ever happened to you five times in one week?

Christie Streety: It teaches you patience. It teaches you growth.

Maria Coca: I mean, there's nothing like it, to be honest.

Angelica Elliott: There's also a sense of accomplishment, a reward, a sense of control. And I guess I guess it's just, it's just that sense of calmness.

Andrew Fleetwood: It's been nice to be able to do something and think about it without kind of tuning out

Page Repp: The reason that we wanted to do it is, hey, it'd be fun for the two of us to do.

TAYLOR: Well, that feeling of envy has certainly happened to me. And I think by the end of this episode, you'll be feelin' it as well!

<VALLEY 101 THEME SONG>

TAYLOR: Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. My name's Taylor, and I'm standing in for our host, Kaila White, who's out on furlough.

TAYLOR: A few weeks ago, I spoke to five people about home gardening and houseplants. Why they do it, how they do it, and what they get from it. Plus, the historical roots of gardening through difficult epochs.

TAYLOR: Now, I'm sharing what I learned, so that maybe you can discover your green thumb too.

<VALLEY 101 THEME SONG fades out>

Part 1:

TAYLOR: When the new coronavirus came to Arizona and we all started social distancing, I noticed something almost immediately after on social media. ... Everyone started gardening!

TAYLOR: Seriously.

TAYLOR: My old ballet teacher. A woman I tried to get an internship from in college. Random people I don't remember why I started following on Twitter. Pictures of backyard gardens, container gardens, house plants and herb plants were filling my social feeds.

TAYLOR: I figured I knew why, but... I started asking around anyway.

***cue music**

Taylor to Andrew: Could you explain to me sort of what is unique about home gardening or just gardening right now specifically and maybe what it could provide to you versus, say, you know, binge watching a Netflix series or or even reading a book? Because both of those are forms of entertainment that could take months. What does gardening provide?

Andrew Fleetwood: It gets us out of the house. I'm, I'm not a big kid around, watch TV, you know, read a book kind of person. I need to be doing stuff.

TAYLOR: That's Andrew Fleetwood, a Tempe resident who happened to start his home garden two months ago with his 5-year-old son because...

Andrew Fleetwood: He's big into the video game, Plants vs. Zombies

TAYLOR: If that's not the cutest thing ever, I don't know what is. Also, I never would've guessed a video game would inspire a kid to eat their veggies!

Taylor to Andrew: Would you say is that in any way something that you kind of rely on now that you are social distancing?

Andrew Fleetwood: As far as entertainment and doing stuff, then yeah. I mean, we're, we try to stay inside as much as possible. You know, we go on walks, you know, stay away from people. But I think last Sunday we really had exhausted kind of everything else to do. So that's when I decided to. You know, I had to run irrigation minds to it. And, you know, I'm, I'm making as many little projects out of this one big, big project as I can.

TAYLOR: Gardening as a way to keep entertained and enjoy family time was something I heard a lot. But I also was also curious if another reason existed. I asked a man named Page Repp, from Tucson, who started his garden with his 8-year-old daughter, Ramona.

Taylor to Page: I've read some articles that some people are looking to start home gardens because they fear a food shortage. Is that in any way applicable to you?

Page Repp: It wasn't that I was fear of food shortages. I was just fearing the. And fearing probably isn't the right way of saying it. But I was just concerned about, you know, having to go to the store if things progressed for a long time and possible exposure and that kind of thing, whereas we could just grow it ourselves. A I think you'd be taste better and be better for us and then be it just. You can't beat that convenience of just going out to the backyard and grabbing your carrots rather than going to the store and getting the carrots.

TAYLOR: This isn't the first time people are gardening due to food shortage concerns. During World War I, Americans started what were first loosely called war gardens. By the end of the war and still today, they're known as "[victory gardens](#)" .. coming from the war-time campaign slogan encouraging people to, quote, "Sow the seeds of victory."

TAYLOR: These victory gardens came back again in World War II, when Americans started experiencing food rationing, and self sufficiency took on a new level of importance. Here's a video from the U.S. office of Civilian Defense, encouraging the gardens:

***The Gardens of Victory:** What can we do to help win the war with food? The answer to that challenge comes from the office of Civilian Defense: Victory gardens! That's the answer.*

TAYLOR: To be clear, Arizona's Governor Doug Ducey had said repeatedly that we're nowhere near close to experiencing a food shortage. Instead, the reason you're seeing so many empty shelves at the grocery store is because people have been stocking piling and grocers haven't been able to keep up with the demand.

TAYLOR: Nevertheless, I understand if people would rather take matters into their own hands. And personally, I'm really bored right now, so gardening sounds fun. But as someone who has literally killed every plant she's ever owned, including succulents which are allegedly the easiest to keep alive, I wanted to find out how to start a garden from the experts.

MUSICAL CUE

TAYLOR: So here's how to garden, according to Angelica Elliott and Maria Coca. Angelica Elliott is the assistant director of public horticulture at Desert Botanical Garden. Maria Coca is a 15-year-gardener who's just a few weeks away from graduating as a certified associate master gardener from the University of Arizona.

***Angelica Elliott:** So first you have to find an area in your in your landscape that receives at least six to eight hours of sunlight. So pretty much full sun because a lot of our vegetables need full sun in order for them to grow. You know, whether it's. You know, lettuce or whether it's tomatoes. So you need to have at least an area that received six or eight hours of sunlight.*

TAYLOR: That's Angelica.

***Maria Coca:** you want to make sure that it's that you can easily access your garden and water without it having to be super burdensome to you. ...*

TAYLOR: And that's Maria.

***Maria Coca:** So let's say that you have that you have the perfect location. You have the water access to it. So now you put this little, you know, square box and you could do that box out of anything, could be out of wood. I particularly like to use redwood or cedar. Those are two heartier woods that you know, that do better outside and they don't, they don't rot, but you could*

also do anything like pavers or really anything to create some sort of layout so that you can visually see where you're planting area is.

TAYLOR: In case you had a hard time hearing that, Maria said she prefers heartier woods like redwood or cedar wood. But you don't really HAVE to make a box. It's more just a canvas for your future masterpiece. Maria also recommends pulling any weeds that may exist.

Angelica Elliott: The second thing and this this is for, you know, Arizona is you have to amend the soil. And what I mean by that is you can either use compost or well rotted manure like steer manure.

Maria Coca: Our Arizona soil is clay ish. So a compact very firmly. So he traps water and it doesn't allow for a lot of drainage. So I like to add like sand or crushed granite or even lava rock to the top of that soil.

TAYLOR: In case I didn't make it clear enough, I am a complete gardening amateur. Hence, the next question I asked.

Taylor Seely: I was thinking in my head or something like a bag of soil from the store. But it sounds like that is different. Do you mean literally filling up the earth and making that your soil or?

Maria Coca: Both. Yeah, I like to mix the native Arizona soil with the store-bought composed or gardening soil that you get from the store. So you mix them both and together you just kind of create this 50/50 ratio mixed in with them with the love of rock and crushed granite that you have in there. So it has a little bit of everything. So when you water it, the soil really gets, you know, hydrated. But it also has some big chunks of the sand or the or the crust granite to provide some oxygen in there as well.

TAYLOR: So at this point, you've cleared a space for the garden and amended the soil with compost, sand or crushed granite, and well decomposed manure. Then...

Angelica Elliott: Then once you either get composer the steer manure or you want to actually, you know, wherever you're going to be growing your vegetable garden, you want to apply the compost or the manure and then add till it in ... So once you kind of, you know, work incorporate, that's compost or manure in, then, you know, just kind of rake it, smooth it out and then you can right, right away. Plant.

Taylor Seely: And then how far down do you drop in? Seeds.

Maria Coca: So each seed has its own requirements and you want to follow the instructions on the bag. So every every seed packet, if you turn it around, it'll give you specifications on how deep, what's the distance? And all of that

TAYLOR: Finally, you water your babies and wait. Your packet of seeds should tell you how long it takes to harvest. 30 to 60 days is pretty normal. If you're starting gardening for the thrill of it, I've heard you're in for a treat

Maria Coca: I mean, there's nothing like it, to be honest. You plant seed and then you water it. And then, you know, a few days later, a week later, you kind of start to see this little green thing as puppet's head out of nowhere dust off the ground. It just kind of breaks the ground. There's nothing like it. I swear, I'm in love with seeds and sprouting seeds and all of that.

TAYLOR: For those apartment dwellers or townhouse residents like myself who don't have a big backyard, fear not! You can do what's called container gardening. It's pretty much the same process.

Angelica Elliott: So what they'll want to use is a good quality type of potting soil. And then they're going to incorporate the compost or the steer manure in their container.

TAYLOR: As far as the type of container?

Angelica Elliott: It doesn't really matter. You can use a terracotta pot. You can use plastic. You can use, you know, ceramic. It doesn't really matter. It's just it's just the the bigger the pot, the bigger the plant is going to get for sure.

TAYLOR: Once you've got that selected, you also have to fertilize your plants.

Angelica Elliott: The fertilizer is because plants, especially fruits and vegetables, there are they they need a lot of nutrients for them to produce fruit. And so a lot of vegetables like a lot of like the nitrogen, the phosphorus and the potassium, they they need a lot of that compared say to, say, a native plant like a cactus.

TAYLOR: So. There you have it. That's how you garden. But if you're like me and still feel somewhat overwhelmed and completely unqualified, here are some tips.

TAYLOR: First, we just talked about fertilizer. Angelica loves using organic fertilizer like fish emulsion, blood meal or bone meal.

TAYLOR: Second, if you're going to use a container garden, DO NOT use Arizona soil. Remember earlier when Maria described it as clay-like and therefore impermeable? Well if it hardens in a container,

Angelica Elliott: What happens is it starts to form almost like a like an adobe brick and it gets so hard in that container. And if it gets hard. Your your your vegetables are going to have a really hard time growing in that adobe brick

TAYLOR: Tip three: If you're getting into gardening more for the food than the process, OR if you know you're someone who tends to get discouraged easily, then Angelica and Maria said

it's a good idea to start with transplants. That means purchasing a plant from a nursery that's already been started.

Maria Coca: For a starting gardener, I would actually recommend transplants because you you want to fall in love with with the idea of gardening and, you know, starting from seeds, it's a little riskier because you plant the seed and you may or may not sprout depending if you got a good batch of seeds

TAYLOR: Tip 4: Whether you choose seeds or transplants, here's a tip for newbie gardeners on which plants to choose.

Angelica Elliott: One other thing that you have to keep in mind, especially here in Arizona, is that we have cool season vegetables and warm season vegetables. So right now, because it's spring and summer, you want to plant your what we call your fruit bearing vegetables, like your eggplants, your chilies, your tomatoes, your pumpkins. And then in the winter months, those are your that's when you plant your leafy stuff like your cabbage, your lettuce. If you were to try to grow lettuce, right now you have a really hard time growing lettuce or cabbage because it's it's too hot. This isn't the season for it. So remember, fruit bearing vegetables is summer or spring, summer. And then your leafy vegetables are in the fall, winter months.

TAYLOR: And finally, tip 5: Arizona summers are harsh. Plants love the sun but even they can get sick of it. You'll want to consider placing a sunshade over your plants and being more attentive to the soil's moisture level.

*musical interlude

TAYLOR: I'm fairly confident that at this point, I've given you every possible piece of information necessary to start a fruit or veggie garden. And to be honest, if you DON'T tag US in your gardening photos going forward, I'm going to take it personally. We're at valley 101 pod on Twitter.

TAYLOR: If I *haven't* persuaded you thus far to start a garden, I think I know just the person who will do the trick.

Christie Streety: My name is Christie Streety and I live in northwest Peoria.

TAYLOR: I met Christie through a Facebook group I found called Maricopa County Houseplant Enthusiast. When we hopped on a Zoom video call, she greeted me with a panoply of houseplants as her backdrop. It was beautiful.

Christie: Can you see me? ... I have a background of plants!

Taylor: That is amazing and I see it and I love it.

TAYLOR: She was quite possibly the most passionate person I have ever met, and an absolute ray of sunshine to speak to.

Christie Streeby: Oh, yeah. So houseplant people are like best friends right off the bat. Everyone who loves houseplants loves everyone who loves houseplants. And the great thing about house plants is it's not competitive at all and no one's really judgey.

TAYLOR: I thought this was absolutely perfect given the crazy world we all live in today. Maybe gardening isn't really your thing, but who couldn't use a little bit of connection right now?

Christie Streeby: I think that everyone wants to care for something and everyone cares for each other. And when you're social, you are able to share that with people. And so caring for a plant, you know, it gives you a little bit of that boost. And greenery, in my opinion, just kind of gives you a little bit of a pick me up. So if you're feeling down or if you're lonely, just having a plant in the room really helps. And then, like I said, if you decide to do it and you decide to become a member of a community like Facebook or Instagram or wherever you wanna go, there's other people out there that you can connect with on a positive level.

TAYLOR: I'm not going to go through an entire lesson on how to be a successful house plant owner because that could be an entire podcast series on its own. But if this sounds like something you're interested in, here's where to start.

Christie Streeby: So everyone should have a pothos. And I mean that as to whether or not you want to be a houseplant lover or not. Everyone should have a pathos in their house. It's a great plant. I actually have 17 different pothos. ... So that's everyone's starter plant. Definitely pathos.

Taylor Seely: And why is that?

Christie Streeby: They're easy. They're very, very forgiving. You can forget to water them. They'll get kind of droopy. They'll look pretty rough. You can give it water and then it'll come right back to life. Or you can even let them sit in water, which most plants cannot sit in water because they will rot and pass. Those will handle that as well, though, even grow in water.

TAYLOR: A pothos is a vining plant. Some people put it on shelves, so it can hang down. Some people position it so the vines climb up the walls. The leaves are heart shaped, which makes it easy to confuse them with philodendron and scindapsus. So be sure to double check.

TAYLOR: From there, maybe you'll become a pro like Christie one day, with over 100 houseplants of your own. ***cue music***

TAYLOR: If there's one thing I learned from all these gardeners, it's that the journey doesn't stop. Once you've picked out your house plant or you've planted your fruits and veggies, you enjoy. Not just the plant itself. But what you've learned along the way.

Christie Streety: What I like the most about it is that you grow with the plants, which is kind of cheesy, but it teaches you patience. It teaches you growth. You are constantly learning new things because when you try a new plant, you kind of have to get to know it and you have to know its needs. And then it works both ways. You know, you kind of become friends with the plant. And it teaches you something and you teach it something.

musical interlude

TAYLOR: That's all for today's episode of Valley 101. I hope you enjoy your victory gardens. Please tag us in your photos. We're @ valley 101 pod on twitter and instagram!

TAYLOR: Also, I realize it might be difficult to pick up supplies for gardening if you're social distancing. I'd encourage you to search local nurseries and call them. Many are still open and offering pick-up and delivery if you shop online. Some also have options to book appointments to visit the nursery to select your plant.

TAYLOR: If you want your question answered on Valley 101, submit it to us at valley101.azcentral.com. Alright, see you next week.