

Building a Keyhole Garden

- What is a Keyhole Garden

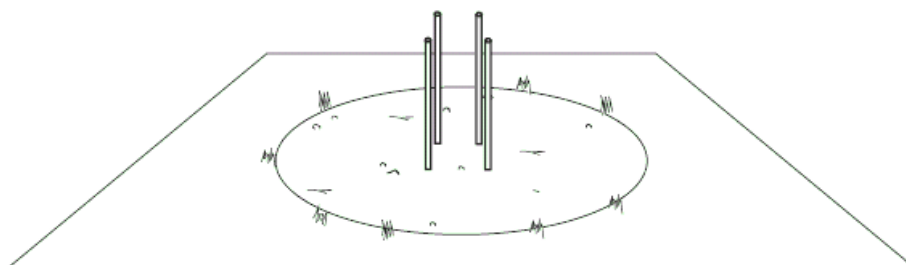
Keyhole gardens are raised garden beds that make use of a central compost bin to provide a sustainable, easy to maintain garden. It has a circular shape usually about 6 ft in diameter with a wedge shaped section removed to allow access to the center of the garden. There is a basket in the center of that extends down and is used to hold compost. The garden gets its name because when viewed from overhead, it looks like a keyhole. Keyhole gardens are ideal in our Sonoran climate because it can be built with recycled materials and requires less water than a conventional garden.

- Pick your garden location

There are several things to consider when deciding where to put your garden. The garden is fed by kitchen scrap compost, so placing the garden within a convenient walking distance from the kitchen is ideal. Also take into consideration how much sun your garden will get. Placing it near a Mesquite or Palo Verde tree or next to your house will shield it in the summer, but will also reduce the amount of sunlight your garden is exposed to.

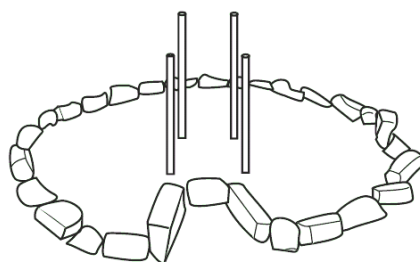
- Plan your layout

The outside diameter of a Keyhole Garden is normally 6 ft with the basket diameter of 18+ inches. An easy way to layout the garden is to draw its outline into the ground. Hammer a stake into the ground where you want the center of the garden to be. Attach a 3 ft length of string to the center stake. The other end of the string will be tied to another stake. Pull the string taught and mark the ground with the 2nd stake tracing a circle around the center. Repeat the process with a smaller length of string for the basket. Wooden posts are secured into the ground around the inner ring. 4 to 6 posts are plenty. Mark a 2 foot wide space into the outer circle that will become the pathway towards the basket.



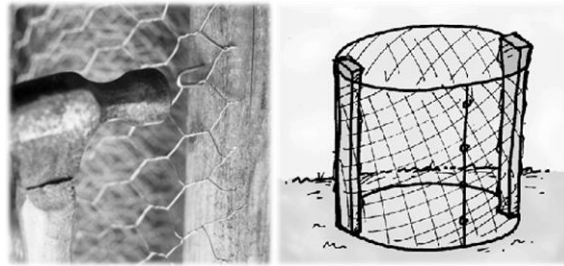
- Build up the outline

Now that the garden is marked out, the basket can be started and the outline of the garden can be lined with brick, rock, or block. The first row of brick for the outside wall will serve as the template for the rest of the garden. Take extra care to make sure it is level and laid out the way you want. Make sure you make the indent for the pathway to the basket.



- Finish the basket

The basket can be finished by wrapping the poles with chicken wire. Secure the wire to the posts using staples or tie wire. The idea is to hold the compost and kitchen scraps in the center while allowing the nutrients to permeate out into the soil.



- Prepare the base for the first layer of soil

There are many different things that can be placed at the base of the garden to improve the garden's soil and provide long term nutrients. Larger rocks and stone can be piled up to allow adequate drainage in monsoon months. [2-4 inch tumbled stone](#) and leech rock works great. Tree debris such as twigs, leaves and branches can be piled up to provide a long term compost source. The base can be lined with old news paper and cardboard to help with moisture retention.

- Build up your soil layers and retaining wall

Add clean topsoil to your garden and mound it towards the basket. [Sandy Topsoil](#) is ideal because it has a sandy consistency and a small percentage of gravel up to 3/8" with low clay content to promote good drainage. The sub layer will start to decompose and provide nutrients to the clean topsoil. After your first layer of soil, adding layers of organic material will improve your soil and provide a head start to your garden. We recommend alternating between [Sandy Topsoil](#) and [Native Compost](#). As the level of soil rises, add levels to your retaining wall. Continue adding layers of soil and compost until the garden is your desired height.

- Prepare your compost basket

The center basket is the primary feature of a keyhole garden. Layers of kitchen scraps are added to the top of the basket and they decompose and break down as they migrate down to the bottom. The decomposed organic material dissipates into the soil of the garden provides a high level of nutrients and moisture to the soil. It is important to prime your basket with already composting material to provide the micro organisms needed to break down your compost material. [Native Compost](#) and [Steer Manure](#) are both excellent choices to get your compost basket going.

- What to compost

There is a large variety of household waste products that make excellent compost materials. Dead leaves, thatch, grass clippings, and straw from the yard are good sources of carbon. Vegetable and fruit scraps, coffee grounds, old tea bags, and green leaves provide nitrogen. It is important to NOT compost any meats, fats, or oils. DON'T add plastic, weeds, animal droppings, or anything that has been chemically treated.

- Plant your crop

Now that your garden is built and the soil is prepared, it's ready to plant. Seeds are planted according to the season. In order to preserve the quality of the soil and repel pests, plant multiple varieties of plants. Root plants should be planted next to leafy plants and onions and garlic can help repel pests. In the winter, the top of the garden should be covered at night with thatch or straw to protect the soil from the cold.

