



Xeriscaping: An Overview

Gardenwerks

- LANDSCAPE DESIGN
- CONSTRUCTION
- IRRIGATION
- GARDEN CENTRE
- MAINTENANCE

The term Xeriscaping was first used in Colorado in the early 1980's in an effort to address the recent drought conditions across the west. Water conservation became a priority and remains so today, considering 60-80% of residential water use is outdoors. The Department of Agriculture reported total precipitation in the Helena area for the year 2014 as a little over 12 inches. Through a combination of practices xeriscaping can drastically reduce water use in your landscape without sacrificing looks. As Doug Welsh of the National Xeriscape Council once said "plants don't waste water, people do". Careful planning and smart maintenance will make your xeriscape a success.

Common Misconceptions

1. Dry Garden: While creating dry gardens, and very drought tolerant gardens, are an integral part of xeriscaping it does not mean you cannot create an "oasis" area and enjoy some of your favorite water loving plants. Take the time to plan your garden and designate low, medium and high water areas (hydrozones) for maximum watering efficiency.
2. No grass: It's all too common to see landscapes that have adhered to the following approach: foundation plantings around the house and fill the rest of the area with turf. Xeriscaping doesn't mean you have to remove all the grass from your landscape. Instead, it encourages us to evaluate where we actually need grass and design around these areas. Establishing low water, low maintenance planting beds instead of expansive turf areas can save you time and money while reducing your water usage.
3. Rock mulch and yuccas: This is probably the most common image conjured up when people hear xeriscape. This may be part of your landscape, but remember rock mulch will absorb and hold much more heat than other organic mulches and may require even more water use.
4. Zeroscaping: Xeriscaping is the correct term, derived from "Xeric" meaning dry and landscape.

Goals

Lower water use and maintenance

Increased use of native plants

Create an aesthetically pleasing landscape that blends in more with the surrounding natural landscape

Support local pollinators and wildlife

Educate others in the community

7 Principles of Xeriscaping

1. **Plan/Design:** Whether you plan the project yourself or you hire a designer, it is crucial to make a plan before you embark on your xeriscaping adventure, even a very simple plan will suffice. A site analysis should be completed, taking into account how the landscape will be used, existing plants and elements, light, wind, views, slopes, soil, drainage and circulation. After completing this you can begin designating areas of the landscape for specific activities and water use areas. A successful xeriscape design utilizes plants with low, medium and high water needs by carefully grouping them together and placing them in an appropriate area in the landscape. Your high water plants should be in a place used regularly, like your home entrance or patio area. A south or west facing slope should be home to low water plants because of the harsher growing conditions.
2. **Reduce turf areas:** As mentioned above, decide how much grass you need and design around these areas. Although bluegrass is the standard, there are many other choices of grass better adapted to our growing climate and for the right situation may be a great choice for your landscape. On average, Bluegrass requires 30" of water a year, requiring 18" of additional water in our area. Raise your mowing height to lower water needs and keep your grass healthy. Make sure to seasonally adjust the amount of water used to irrigate your lawn area.
3. **Plant Selection:** Carefully select plants that meet your site conditions and hardiness zone. Take into account the light exposure, soil type and drainage, wind exposure and water requirements. Secondary considerations are color, size, form, texture, wildlife/pollinator benefit and edible parts. Within the plant list there should be three distinct lists separating the plants by water needs. While many of the plants included will probably be drought tolerant, don't be afraid to include your favorites (even if they require more water). By grouping plants by their watering needs overall watering efficiency is increased and plants aren't getting under/over watered.
4. **Soil Amendments:** The easiest time to amend your soil is before planting. We generally have soil that is either too high in clay or sand, and almost always rocky! Compost is the answer to both problems, increasing organic matter and water holding capacity in sandy soils and improving structure and drainage in clay soils. Thoroughly mix the compost and existing soil prior to planting for best results.
5. **Mulch:** Mulching provides many benefits to a garden, both functional and aesthetic. Proper use of mulch can help to conserve water by reducing soil temperature and limiting wind exposure. Where possible organic mulches are preferred because of their ability to break down and improve the condition of the soil. Inorganic mulches, such as rock, are also useful for certain situations but keep in mind the area can heat up quickly causing damage to susceptible plants, especially winter desiccation.
6. **Irrigation:** Proper irrigation design and understanding how to use it is key to a successful xeriscape. Irrigation should be adjusted monthly, taking into account the changing weather conditions. Successfully determining how long and how often to run your system will allow you to achieve maximum water conservation while creating a healthy, happy landscape.

There are many guidelines for irrigation, but ultimately each site will differ and adjustments will need to be made to find what works for your gardens. All new plantings require water to become established,

the larger the plant the longer the establishment period. Once established, some plants require water a couple times a year, some require occasional water and some need regular irrigation. Reducing the irrigation as the landscape ages should prove easy because of the use of hydrozones.

New technology is improving the irrigation industry and continues to find ways to improve efficiency. We consider timers and rain sensors as a must, but are incorporating more smart timers and other new products, such as soil moisture sensors.

Point source emitters are preferred for most plantings, with the exception of using netafim for groundcovers. We prefer using rotors to establish and maintain native grass areas, even if watering frequency is cut back after establishment.

Remember that even the most drought tolerant plants may need supplemental water during the hottest part of the summer. Certain areas, such as boulevard plantings, slopes, south facing beds, rock mulched areas or anywhere near a paved area will dry out much faster than other areas.

7. Maintenance: All landscapes require maintenance, including xeriscapes. If low maintenance is one of your priorities then steps can be taken during the design process to create a landscape requiring less input. Regular tasks include: checking the irrigation system, weeding (much easier to manage when they are small), deadhead for repeated blooms, fertilize as needed (most native plants require little to no fertilizer), and mange critters. Herbaceous perennials and grasses can be cut down in either fall or spring. Top-dress organic mulch every few years. Sit back and enjoy!

Sources

Meyer, Susan E., et al. *Landscaping on the New Frontier*. Utah: Utah State University Press, 2009.

Knopf, Jim. *The Xeriscape Flower Gardener*. Boulder: Johnson Books, 1991.

Knox, Kimberley M, ed. *Landscaping for Water Conservation: XERISCAPE!* Aurora: City of Aurora and Denver Water Department, 1989.

Colorado State University Extension

Colorado Water Wise

New Mexico Xeriscape Council

Other Resources

Colorado State University Extension

Plant Select (Plant Search & Planting Designs)

Northcreek Nurseries (Plant Search Tool)

Montana Native Plant Society

MSU Extension

City of Bozeman

Montana Nursery and Landscape Association

Highcountry Gardens