

Xeriscape Guidelines and Information

Xeriscape landscaping (commonly known as “xeriscape”) is defined as landscaping which has been specifically designed for areas that are susceptible to drought or where water conservation is practiced. Contrary to common belief, it does not mean that no irrigation is necessary, it means that with proper design, a minimum of water will be needed to maintain an attractive landscape appearance.

Xeriscape Considerations

1) The Dirt

Carefully prepared plant beds can reduce water usage by almost half. That’s because soil plays a huge part in a water-wise landscape. Good soil absorbs and holds moisture better and encourages plants to grow deep roots so they can access moisture even when topsoil is dry. Improving the soil up front can help your plants become healthier and better suited to handle low-water conditions. Clay soil, commonly found in Colorado, is dense and sticky and doesn’t drain well, thus making it difficult for roots to grow and spread. It requires at least 6” of organic matter, which must be thoroughly tilled into the area to be planted with either turf, shrubs or perennials.

2) Limit Turf Areas

Xeriscape does not mean “no turf”. Consider your needs and keep turf areas small and manageable. Plant a warm weather turf which, once established, can tolerate the heat of summer with a reasonable amount of water.

3) Use water efficient plants

Water efficient plants do not mean tumbleweeds and plants that require no water at all. It means plants that are native to this area or have proven to be well-adapted to this area and that will survive our temperature extremes with a minimum of water once established. Choose plants that will be the appropriate size at full growth, which typically **takes 3 years in Colorado**. Group plants together that have the same water requirements; this will insure better success than mixing plants with different needs. There are many options for attractive native plants for our area, and an experienced landscape professional can assist you in making the right selections. Resist the urge to over-plant. This is a common mistake homeowner’s (and landscapers) make as the initial size of many shrubs and perennials are not impressive. However, by leaving room for future growth you will avoid overcrowding and having to remove plants that compete with each other for water and nutrients.

4) The Right Design

Consideration needs to be given to the exposure (sun or shade) and slope of your yard. A west facing exposure will subject your yard to the worst of the day's heat in summer. An eastern exposure will give your plants morning sun, but not a full 6 hours which many plants require. Shade loving plants should be grouped together, as should those who require full sun. The drainage of your lot is an important element: rain or irrigation water should not pool or stand. Plants should not be located too close to drain spouts. Slopes may provide too much runoff, creating a difficult environment for plants to obtain enough water to thrive. All these items need to be taken into account when a landscape plan is designed.

5) Use of mulch or rock

Xeriscaping does not mean using rock everywhere. In fact, river rock as a ground cover has some negatives: In order to prevent rock or gravel from sinking into the ground and needing to be replaced, it requires use of a cloth underlayer, or weed barrier. While this helps the rock stay in place, it in turn keeps water and nutrients from getting into the soil. Even more importantly, the heat that is not reflected off the rock will be absorbed by it and not released until well after the sun goes down. This means that plants in a rock bed will constantly be baking in heat.

An alternative to rock covering is the use of organic mulches which absorb the heat and safely pass it through to the underlying soil, keeping the soil at a more constant temperature and eventually breaking down and adding nutrients to the soil. Mulch needs to be replaced frequently, but provides an attractive look and should, at a minimum, be used directly around plants that are placed in a rock bed to keep the absorption of heat from the rocks to a minimum. With good planning and design, all these important elements can be taken into consideration to provide an attractive, long-lasting residential landscape.

Recommended Plants for Xeriscape

There are dozens and dozens of options for good xeriscape plant material in the Front Range area. A few of those that are known to be reliable perennials if planted in the right place with proper light and appropriate water are:

- Korean Feather Reed Grass
- Mexican Feather Grass
- Blue Avena Grass
- Penstemon
- Yarrow
- Prairie Coneflower
- Coral Bells (Heuchera)
- Torch Lily
- Agastache
- Penstemon

Desert Moss (groundcover)
Creeping Thyme (groundcover)
Turkish Veronica (groundcover)
Corsican Violet
Red-twigged Dogwood (shrub)
Variegated Dogwood (shrub)
Ninebark (shrub)
Serviceberry (tree form)
Lilac (many varieties of shrubs)
Evergreens (many species of pine and spruce in many shapes and sizes)

Over-used and not recommended:

Junipers or arbor vitae of any size and shape (not always hardy and almost impossible to remove when mature)
Russian Sage (invasive)