

Xeriscaping – what we’ve learned in 35 years

By John Swayze, Swingle Lawn, Tree & Landscape Care

This year we celebrate the 35th anniversary of the first xeriscape demonstration garden in Denver, Colorado. But there still seems to be many misconceptions about what xeriscaping is and how to take advantage of it.

Xeriscaping is a design and maintenance method built on the idea of conserving water. Now that does not mean turning your landscape into a scene from the Mars Rover.

When incorporated well, xeriscaping provides a living, beautiful, useful and inviting landscape – all based on these seven principles:

Planning and Design

Knowing how you will use each area of your property and designing the landscaping to fit around that use.

Soil Improvement

Once you know how you will use an area you should ensure the soil is appropriate for that need.

Efficient Irrigation

Ensure your system is properly maintained and functioning correctly. Remember, sidewalks do not need to be watered. Select the best method and frequency of your irrigation based on the plant material in each area of your design.

Plant Zones

Planning zones that are populated by plants with similar water requirements will allow you to maintain areas that need more water while reducing irrigation to low water areas.

Mulch

Utilizing mulch in every planted area, with a low or high water need, should be a common practice. Mulch shades the soil, reducing water loss from evaporation and the growth of weeds. Bark, wood chips and other organic mulches decompose over time, contributing their nutrients to the soil, something rock and gravel mulches do not do.

Turf Alternatives

Replacing turf with a low water garden is a great step towards conservation. But when turf is required in an area, consider using a low water, low maintenance species of turf.

Maintenance

Landscapes of any kind require maintenance and xeriscapes are no exception. An added benefit of low water areas is that many common weed species will struggle in the dry conditions, while drought tolerant plants thrive.

Succeeding at xeriscaping

Many pitfalls, which prevent success with xeriscaping, often begin with a poor or overreaching design.

I usually recommend tackling the areas of a landscape which typically struggle in their current design. Perfect candidates include slopes, narrow strips along hardscapes, areas of turf that have become pathways for misguided pedestrians and any other areas where your current plant material fails to thrive.

Steep slopes covered in turf rarely get the necessary water and are a nightmare for the lawn mowers. By eliminating this area, you can create artful terraces filled with beautiful plants that will thrive with a lack of water.

We can apply the same idea to those pesky strips of turf, which more often than not are filled with weeds and are heavily trampled. Xeriscaping strips add beauty to the space. They will let you change the irrigation to a more efficient method that doesn't send your water down the drain. The right plant selection helps keep pedestrians out of these areas as well. The idea of transforming "ugly" areas of a landscape into focal points requiring less water and maintenance seems like an easy win-win to me.

The last point I would like to address when it comes to design is how important plant selection can be to your success. Our designs often focus on the water needs of the plants and the overall aesthetics. But maintenance requirements are commonly overlooked, as is the mature size of the plant.

Filling a large terraced slope with small plants that need to be sheared down several times a year is a burden. As are large shrubs planted in a small area, which create more pruning work for you and stress for the plants.

Replacing turf in stressed areas with planted beds certainly fulfills the principal of turf alternatives. But we can take this even further in areas that still require turf.

Letting turf go dormant during the heat of summer will reduce the water, fertilizer, pesticide and maintenance requirements, and is actually healthier for the grass during this stressful time. If letting the turf go a little brown is not an option, consider a different species of turf like tall fescue, buffalo grass or even micro clover, which all use less water than blue grass.

Don't be intimidated by xeriscaping. Keep these steps in mind and enjoy your journey to conservation:

- Start with the easy wins
- Design for success
- Select plants that fit the area
- Keep plants with similar needs together
- Mulch your plantings
- Evaluate your irrigation system and needs
- Replace turf where possible with lower water options
- Sit back and admire what you've created

John Swayze is an ISA Certified Arborist, lifelong gardener and has worked for Swingle Lawn, Tree & Landscape Care for 10 years. John has a long-standing passion for his own gardens and helping other create and nurture their own. Visit myswingle.com for more information.