

Xeriscape – Planning and Design

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All of this warm and dry weather prompted me to think about ways that we can improve water use in landscaping so I decided to talk about Xeriscape. The term “xeriscape” was coined in Colorado in 1981 following several years of drought. It combines the Greek word “Xeros” meaning dry, with the word “landscape”. Xeriscape-type landscaping is a package of seven common-sense steps for making a landscape more water-efficient. These steps include: Planning and Design, Soil Analysis, Appropriate Plant Selection, Practical Turf Areas, Efficient Irrigation, Use of Mulches, and Appropriate Maintenance.

Each step is a good gardening practice. However, the more of them you use, the more water-efficient your landscape will become. A xeriscape landscape can reduce outdoor water consumption by as much as 50% without sacrificing the quality and beauty of your property. Xeriscape requires less fertilizer and fewer chemicals, thus creating a low maintenance landscape saving you time, effort, and money. But you don’t have to totally redesign your landscape to save water. Significant water savings can be realized by modifying your watering schedule, knowing how and when to water, using efficient watering methods and learning about the different water needs of plants.

Whether you are developing a new landscape or renovating an existing one, proper planning and design are important. It is best to begin with a base map. A base map is a plan of the property showing the location of the house, its orientation to the sun, other structures on the site, land features and existing vegetation. Next you need a site analysis. This will indicate desirable and undesirable views, direction of winter and summer winds, and drainage patterns. Incorporate as many of the natural elements of the site into the design as possible, such as existing trees and shrubs. Also, note the orientation of the home (north-south-east-west). This will help determine where to locate plants best suited for sun or shade.

Incorporate shade into the design. Shade from trees and structures in the landscape keeps the landscape cooler and reduces water loss while improving the living environment. You should also plan for different use areas; determine which areas are public, private and service. Public areas are front walks and patios where attractiveness is most desired and maintenance is highest. Private areas of the landscape, usually the backyard, are where most outdoor activities occur. This area should be functional, attractive and durable. Service areas require the least amount of maintenance and are used for storage of lawn equipment, trash cans, etc.

Once you have your use areas defined you can begin to assign water-use zones. These zones should be designated high (regular watering), moderate (occasional watering) and low (natural rainfall) water use zones. If you can learn to live with “less than perfect” appearance in extended dry periods, you have taken the first step in creating a water-efficient landscape.

Finally, you should develop a master plan. This will be different for everyone, because we all have different taste in plants. A key point to remember is that, simplicity in design will ensure easy maintenance and water-use efficiency. Once the master plan is developed plants can be selected that will work best in all areas of the landscape. I hope that this will help you create a more water-efficient landscape. We will discuss the remaining 6 steps in Xeriscaping in later issues. If you would like a complete copy of the University of Georgia publication on *Xeriscape, a guide to developing a water-wise landscape*, you can go online at <http://pubs.caes.uga.edu/caespubs/pubcd/B1073.htm>.