

HOME GROUNDS FACT SHEET



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Xeriscape Landscaping

Increasing difficulties in obtaining water resources are making people rethink the way they use water. Landscapes can demand nearly 50 percent of the water used for home consumption during the outdoor growing season. Savings in water consumption (during the summer) of 50-60% can be achieved through the use of xeriscape. Xeriscape, water conservation through creative landscaping, integrates seven ways to save water and money.

Whether old or new, your landscape can be more water efficient simply by utilizing the water-wise concepts of xeriscape. With a little effort, you can be on your way to a beautiful xeriscape. Not only will your yard look great, but xeriscape improvements will increase the value and selling potential of your home.

The following principles of xeriscape serve as a basic introduction. Follow these steps:

1. Planning and design

Many people create their own designs with excellent results. Landscape professionals can also serve as helpful resources. They can provide advice, critique or develop plans for you. Planning is the most important step to a successful xeriscape because it allows you to install your landscape in phases, which can minimize the initial expenses.

2. Wise turf use

Locate turf where it is most beneficial. When renovating an existing lawn or installing new turf, select turf types and varieties for low maintenance and reduced water needs. Separate turf from trees, shrubs, ground covers and flowering plants so it may be irrigated separately.

3. Efficient irrigation

In many cases, well planned sprinkler systems can save water. For efficient water use, always irrigate turf areas separately from other plantings. Landscape plantings should be grouped according to similar water needs. At this point in time, turf areas can only be watered properly with sprinklers. Trees, shrubs, garden flowers and ground covers, however, can be watered efficiently with low volume drip, spray or bubbler-type emitters. Regular adjustment of your irrigation system will save you water and money.

4. Soil improvement

Soil improvement allows for better absorption of water and improved water-hold capacity of the soil. Soils that have an acceptable percentage (3-5%) of organic matter also provide additional nutrients to plants. Improve the soil prior to planting and the installation of any irrigation system.

5. Use mulches

When mulches are properly selected and applied they keep soil temperatures moderated, minimize loss of soil moisture due to evaporation, reduce weed growth and slow erosion. Certain organic mulches can provide landscape interest. Organic mulches are typically wood chips and nuggets, nut shells, shredded bark, seed hulls (cocoa hulls are popular), pine needles and chopped leaves. Inorganic mulches include rock and various gravel products. Apply the appropriate thickness of mulch directly on the soil. Avoid using sheet plastic in planting areas.

6. Use lower water demand plants

Most plants have a place in xeriscape, especially adapted varieties. Numerous attractive trees, shrubs, garden flowers, ground covers and turfs are available to complement your xeriscape. Low water requiring turfs such as tall fescue are also available.

7. Appropriate maintenance

Regular maintenance preserves the intended beauty of your landscape and saves water. Because of their design, xeriscapes can help reduce maintenance costs. Awareness of pruning, weeding, proper fertilization, pest control and irrigation system adjustments will further water savings in the landscape. Always water according to plant needs.

Contact local professionals and Cornell Cooperative Extension representatives for specific details about these fundamentals and how they can benefit your landscape.

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Planning xeriscape

When planning your xeriscape, the first things to consider are:

- ✓ What do you need from your landscape?
- ✓ How much time do you want to spend in your landscape, for pleasure and for maintenance?

Answers to the above questions and those that follow help you get the most from your landscape planning efforts and turn your dream into reality.

- ✓ What kind of backyard activities do you enjoy? garden parties, sunning, games?
- ✓ Do you have children or pets? what are their needs?
- ✓ Do you need storage for tools, firewood, recreational vehicles or other items?
- ✓ What image or style do you want? formal, traditional, natural?
- ✓ How much sun will the area receive?
- ✓ Would you like to have specific plants in your landscape?
- ✓ Are you interested in growing a vegetable garden?
- ✓ Does your property have views to preserve or to screen?
- ✓ What kind of qualities already exist in your landscape? slopes, existing, plants, structures, rocks?
- ✓ Is the drainage in your yard adequate?
- ✓ Are there other questions you need to answer?

Zoning the landscape

Xeriscapes take advantage of different microclimatic conditions. Microclimates are affected by moisture, sun, shade, air movement and heat. For example, reflected light from south and west-facing structures creates high temperatures that increase the loss of water from nearby plantings. Deciduous shade trees strategically planted in these exposures reduce temperatures in summer, yet allow sunlight to enter in the winter.

Similarly, water-loving plants can be grown in a microclimate where irrigation and other water runoff is captured in drainage swales, on north facing slopes or in areas surrounding the gutter basin. Several microclimates exist within every landscape. As plants grow and provide shade or screen, microclimates change accordingly.

Creating microclimate zones

The following are guidelines for the creation of three xeriscape microclimates. Each zone is based upon the amount of water applied. All the examples incorporate the seven xeriscape fundamentals reviewed earlier.

Very low water zone:

This is the lowest water zone in a xeriscape, providing the greatest savings relative to traditional landscapes. These beds or plantings are generally located the furthest distance from the residence or proximity to available water. Irrigation is needed only during the establishment of new plantings. Once established, the plants in this zone require no supplemental water. Plants in the very low water zone must be selected carefully for minimal water use.

Low water zone:

Plants growing in this zone require more water than is available from natural precipitation. Take advantage of runoff from downspouts, driveways and patios to provide this water. During very dry periods, supplemental irrigation may be necessary.

Moderate water zone:

Even though this zone uses the most water, it still demands less than traditional landscapes. This zone is kept small to limit water need. The moderate water use zone may be considered a mini-oasis and is best located near entry ways or areas of high use.

Long term beauty and savings with xeriscape!

By following the guidelines and tips in this leaflet, you can proudly create your own water-saving xeriscape. Trade plants and ideas with neighbors, friends and family. A well planned xeric-type landscape will increase your property value. Most of all, you will know that all the beauty around you is saving precious water.