

ROXBOROUGH WATER & SANITATION DISTRICT

7 Basic Principles of Xeriscaping

Did you know almost 50% (on larger home lots – it can be more than 50%) of all the household water we use goes outside to maintain a landscape! The biggest reason? People landscape their yards and gardens with plants that are NOT native to their region. Kentucky bluegrass works great in Kentucky's climate; not so much in Colorado's! Working with the amount of rainfall, wind, and sun received in your particular area and at your specific elevation are defining reasons for having a successful, water-efficient landscape, (or not).

First, thank you for your interest in wanting to make a difference, by saving water. The following principles are smart horticultural practices that work for a High Plains semi-arid to desert environment, which is what we have in Roxborough.

1. DESIGN A PLAN.

A water-smart landscape begins with a smart design plan. Think about how you might want to divide your zones into outdoor rooms, each with their own water requirements. This is called "hydrozoning." Begin with simple but important pieces of information on a large piece of paper. Your basic diagram needs to show you the major elements of your landscape – house, driveway, sidewalk, deck or patio, trees. Also note the following:

- the location of spigots, downspouts and external electrical outlets
- fences, walls and other hardscape structures
- existing lawn, garden, shrub masses and flower beds
- trees (both yours and your neighbors, if they shade part of your yard)
- slopes
- north facing
- existing landscape
- the water needs of your current plants

Now, think about how much of your landscape can be upgraded. How much existing water-thirsty turf can be reduced or replaced with drought-tolerant grasses, low growing groundcovers or individual plants surrounded by mulch. If you like to entertain, consider adding or increasing a backyard patio space where grass doesn't grow well, isn't played on, or can be eliminated altogether.

Develop a "planting plan". Use colored pencils to show what kind of color or water-efficient plants, shrubs or trees (for added shade) you want in specific bedded areas. Continue all the way around your landscape, both in the front, back and sides of the house. Once your plan is on paper, you might want to get

a second opinion from a Xeriscape specialist. Many nurseries have experienced design planners who are worth the consultation to make sure your plan will achieve the best outcome. They can also advise on which areas to do first, if you are unable to physically or financially do it all in one season.

2. Soil Preparation.

A master gardener I spoke with said it best: “You won’t grow anything well if you haven’t created a good soil environment first.” What kind of soil do you have? If it’s clay, this is dense, compact, and slow to absorb or release water. If water is applied to clay soil too quickly, it either sits on the surface or runs off. Over watering heavy clay soil can actually drown plants. You must amend this type of soil. Talk to your area nursery specialist for their recommendation of best products to use and for proper quantities.

Roots need both air and water. If your soil is sandy, it won’t hold water very well unless irrigated frequently. Plants in sandy soils tend to dry out quickly. Here, too, amend your soil before you plant for deeper roots and more efficient watering. Ask a soil specialist how much organic matter per thousand square feet should be worked into your soil.

3. Efficient Irrigation.

As with any new garden, a Xeriscape one will also require irrigation, perhaps a little more in the first couple of seasons while the plants’ roots systems are developing. In new garden bed areas and berms, your best bet is to lay a drip irrigation system. For turf areas, re-evaluate the types of sprinkler heads you may have and replace or adjust any to more water efficient ones. Sprinklers should spray the water low, evenly and only on landscape, not sidewalks and driveways. Install a rain shut off device.

4. Zoning of Plants.

Different areas in your landscape will get different amounts of sun, wind and moisture. To minimize water waste, **group together plants with similar needs.** You can really get X-cited about the variety of X-rated Xeriscape friendly plants and shrubs readily available. Many have long blooming season and attractive leaves. Some provide fall interest with multi-hued foliage and fruit, while others offer nice structure in the winter garden. A little online or garden book research will show you photos of perennials and annuals that are X, XX, and XXX rated!

5. Mulch.

Mulch is as important to a healthy garden as water, sun, and good soil. It limits weed growth, keeps plant roots cool, prevents soil from crusting, minimizes

evaporation, reflects heat, and helps hold in natural nutrients. Organic mulches are best. Larger bulk size chips are heavier and won't blow away in windy climates as easily as the lighter shredded mulch. Always keep a healthy 3-4" layer of mulch on your beds. It's a beautiful and important topping to any garden.

6. Turf Alternatives.

The most controversial and most misunderstood of the Xeriscape principles is the concept of appropriate turf. There is a place for turfgrass, even in a Xeriscape garden! Turf provides a play surface for children and pets and is an important element in cooling the environment, reducing erosion, and preventing glare from the sun. But, a conservation-conscious homeowner will need to determine how large a turf area is really needed based on how it is used and during which seasons it is used. Limit turf to useful spaces. Determine which types of grasses will best serve your needs. Learn about less water-thirsty alternatives such as buffalograss, blue grama, tall and fine fescues. An added bonus: these varieties of turf will also cut down on your lawn-mowing chores!

7. Appropriate Maintenance.

The first year or two, your new landscape will probably require a fair amount of weeding, but as plants mature, they will crowd out the weeds, significantly reducing your maintenance time. Your new Xeriscape will need proper irrigation, pruning, fertilizing and pest control, similar to a traditional landscape, EXCEPT, maintenance needs will decrease over time!

Xeriscape offers beautiful, livable landscapes without using excess water. It allows areas close to us to be cooler and interesting to look at, while investing less water on parts of the landscape in which we spend less time. Overall, your efforts in converting to a Xeriscape-friendly garden will pay off, year after year!

Be sure to also download & share with your family:

102 Ways To Be Water-Efficient.

Every drop counts! Thank you.