



Water-wise Landscaping Techniques Save Water, Time and Money

by Betsy S. Franz

With South Texas reeling from another extremely dry summer and extended drought, many of us just look to our yard with disgust and frustration. Just when it seems the grass has finally rooted in... bam! Here comes the Texas heat cooking our yards to a crisp and turning what was once a full, lush perfectly manicured lawn into nothing short of a dust bowl.

Inside, rearranging the furniture and redecorating the interiors of our homes can do a lot to create a whole new look and feel without spending a lot of money. And when it comes to our outdoor spaces, following the seven basic steps of Xeriscaping allows homeowners to rearrange and “redecorate” their exterior living spaces to create a landscape which is not only new and exciting but is also healthier for the environment and more resistant to our South Texas summers.

Although many people think the term Xeriscape™ means living with cacti, succulents and other drought tolerant plants, following the principles of this water-wise landscaping method can actually create an outdoor environment that is still full of lush plantings and colorful foliage but which requires less time and money for upkeep. The secret is in the design.

In 1981, the term Xeriscape™ was created (and trademarked) by a joint task force of the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado (ALCC) and Denver Water to describe a form of landscaping that helps to conserve water. The term was defined to mean “Water Conservation through Creative Landscaping” and actually involves much more than just selecting plants that thrive without water. In fact, with some careful re-arranging, most homeowners may be able to create a water-wise landscape with the plants that they already have in their yards.

There are seven principles that were created by the original task force that developed the concept of Xeriscaping, and these principles are followed by most water-resource organizations across the country today. Basically, the premise is that if plants are selected based on the conditions of the planting site, and grouped with other plants that have similar requirements, the overall landscape will require less water and less maintenance. In other words, if gardeners learn to work with Mother Nature rather than against her, their yards will thrive and flourish on their own, with little additional care (or water) from the property owner.

In theory, an ideal low-maintenance landscape would consist of plants that grew naturally on your property before your house was constructed. And although the construction of your home probably altered the natural site conditions to some extent, the original plant-community or ecosystem of your area should still be taken into account when planning your landscape.

Does this mean that if you live in a pine flatland you can't have a beautiful rose garden? No. The proponents of Xeriscape just suggest that exotic, showy plants which require more care should be kept to



a minimum and grouped in locations for optimal enjoyment, such as an entryway or within view from a major window or patio. This is called the oasis zone. Areas that are more distant and less visible can be planted with low-maintenance, native plants, which will require less care and will also benefit visiting wildlife. Again, grouping all plants by their water requirements is key.

It may seem like a daunting task to become familiar with the care requirements of the plants that you already have in your landscape or would like to add. But many organizations, such as local water resource organizations or County Extension Agencies provide detailed lists of local plants and their care requirements. By arranging the plants in your yard to be grouped by their water needs, no plants should ever have to be over-watered or under-watered again.

But before you pick up the shovel for your garden re-do, here are the seven steps to keep in mind for creating a water-wise landscape:

Plan and design – The most important step for creating a water efficient landscape is planning and design. Take a site inventory of your property to study the current conditions that affect plants. Aspects to take note of while doing a site inventory are –areas of sun and shade, areas that drain well or collect water, location of hardscape items such as driveways, pools, etc. First, select certain areas for your oasis zones. For all other areas, your goal is to take advantage of the current site conditions and to group plants by their maintenance needs, such as locating plants with higher water requirements in areas that receive rainwater runoff. If you already have a sprinkler system

installed, plants with similar water requirements should be planted to coincide with irrigation zones.

Obtain a soil analysis – A soil analysis is another important step to insure that you choose plants suited for your yard. Landscape soils may vary from rocky to clay. A soil's pH level – acid, neutral or alkaline, should also be analyzed. Coastal area soils often contain salt and shell fragments which raise a soil's alkalinity. Choosing plants which are appropriate for your soil type will encourage success with less maintenance. Since areas of your landscape may have been amended with fill dirt, it is important to take soil samples from several areas around the yard. You can often buy kits to test your soil from local garden centers, or from local Cooperative Extension Service offices.

Choose Proper Plants – Take your site survey with you when you visit your local nursery or landscape designer. Choose plants for the sun, water and soil conditions of your property. Although Native plants can play an important part in a water-wise landscape, following the principles of "right plant, right place" and grouping plants by their care requirements will allow you to utilize many plants that are not native. Your goal should be to establish a yard that will be self-sustained by existing conditions. All specialty plants, such as vegetables or ornamental flowers, should be grouped in smaller areas to allow you to focus your watering and care.

Use Turf Wisely - Homeowners spend thousands of dollars annually fertilizing and watering their lawns, only to cut it down as soon as it grows too high. Advocates of Xeriscaping suggest minimizing lawn areas and replacing them with less water and labor-intensive plantings. For the lawn areas that you do retain, proper care will reduce water needs. When mowing, raise your lawn mower blade to the highest possible height. The rule is that when you mow you should not remove more than 1/3 of the leaf blade. Use a mulching lawn mower and leave grass clippings when you mow. This reduces the lawns need for both water and fertilizer. Consider groundcovers, mulch or walkways or other alternatives for lawn. In addition, if your yard has an irrigation system, make sure to check the sprinkler heads often in warmer months and make sure they have the clearance they

need to reach the area they are intended for.

Irrigate efficiently – All installed irrigation systems should include an automatic rain sensor shut-off device. Even with manual irrigation, rain gauges should be used to determine when to water. Take advantage of your sprinkler system's zones and water more drought tolerate plants less frequently. Various sprinkler heads such as drip, tricklers and bubblers are sometimes the most water efficient since they apply water directly to the plants. Irrigate only when plants show they need it by drooping or wilting. Over-watering can cause more problems than under watering, such as dollar weed and fungal growth. Watering less often and more deeply allows a plant to develop deeper root systems, rather than shallow surface roots. Water early in the day, before sunrise, to avoid evaporation.

Use mulches – Adding mulch to flower beds and around trees and shrubs does a tremendous amount to conserve moisture, while at the same time, adding nutrients to the soil. Purchased mulch now comes in various colors and types, including pine bark, melaleuca, and eucalyptus. Mulch should be spread at a thickness of 2-4 inches on plant beds. Mulch should be loosened with a rake or other garden tool on a regular basis, and new mulch should be added to keep the 2-4" thickness. Items such as gravel or colored rocks are not a good choice for a garden if your goal is moisture retention. They don't hold moisture and can also reflect heat which may stress the plants.

Perform proper maintenance – Plants that are suited to their environment need much less care in the form of fertilizer and pest control than other plants. However, for garden touch-ups, remember that less is more. If you feel the need to have a completely bug-free environment, always use the least toxic method available and spot treat the problem area only. If you want to push things along with fertilizer, use natural or slow release varieties. Remember that over-fertilizing can do more harm than good.

According to local studies, an average South Texas family of four can use 400 gallons of water per day, and about 30 percent of that is devoted to outdoor uses. Waterwise landscaping not only conserves our water resources, but it also saves the property owner money in the process in the form of lower water bills.

