

## OUT ON A LIMB

‘What is Xeriscaping?’

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A xeriscape is planting that has the ability to withstand dry conditions. No, it’s not rocks, junipers, cactus and yuccas. A xeriscape doesn’t have to look like the Arizona desert. You can still have grass and irrigation as the purpose is to achieve a significant reduction in water usage.

There are seven basic principles to apply when installing a Xeriscape.

- Planning and design
- Soil analysis
- Practical turf areas
- Efficient irrigation
- Use of mulches
- Appropriate maintenance

Start with a plan. The plan should be done as any other except, the turf areas should be small and reasonably shaped. Grass will require more irrigation than the shrub areas and long narrow strips are more difficult to irrigate than compact blocky, square areas. Select a grass such as Bermuda which is more drought tolerant than most of the other grasses. Create water use zones and mass all of the plants that demand a higher use of water in the same area. Generally select plants with a lower demand for water such as nandina, Indian hawthorn, junipers, barberry, etc. Dogwoods, hydrangeas and azaleas are not xeriscape plants. Plant windbreaks to deflect the western winds and plant shade trees on the southern and western exposures.

Soil analysis. For conservation of water in shrub areas, till in 4 – 6 inches of organic material such as shredded pine bark, peat moss or compost. Turf areas may be too large to feasibly make any amendments. Take a soils test to determine what the fertilization requirements are and amend the soil accordingly.

Practical turf areas. Keep all lawn areas small. Allow grass begin to stress before watering. Water less frequently and thoroughly when you do water to establish a deep root zone. Water until it begins to run off. Raise the mowing height to 3” during summer droughts and always allow the clippings to fall.

Efficient irrigation. Provide water without waste. Make sure the irrigation system is in good working order and not throwing over sidewalks and into streets. Adjust the water pressure to disallow heads to fog. Large droplets are less susceptible to evaporation and wind drift. Do not tie foundation plantings on the western and southern exposures with plantings on the eastern and northern exposures. Do not water grass and shrubs on the same zone and water between late evening and mid morning. Drip irrigation applies water slowly and efficiently to the plant root zone as opposed to throwing water up in the air. Drip irrigation has little chance of waste through evaporation and runoff. Install either a soil moisture or rain sensor to keep the controller from coming on during or after a rain.

Use of mulches. Mulch all plantings with an organic covering such as pine straw, pine or hardwood bark. Mulching conserves moisture, keeps the soil cool in the summer and insulates the soil in the winter, helps to prevent weed growth and prevents soil compaction. Inorganic mulches such as rocks and gravel makes the ground hotter in the summer and this practice should be limited.

Appropriate maintenance. Good maintenance preserves the beauty of the xeriscape and saves water. Pruning, weeding, proper fertilization, pest control and irrigation system adjustments all serve to conserve water.