

Xeriscaping: 25 years

by Kara Csibrik

25 years ago the folks at Denver Water coined the term Xeriscape (xeros is greek for “dry”) transforming the way we think about landscaping in the arid west. Designed as a landscape methodology that would complement both the availability of our most precious natural resource and the unique beauty of the west, the concept of Xeriscape has gained acceptance and appreciation over the years. Yet, there are still many who may be new to the concept or unsure of how to convert their landscapes. Whether you are new to the area, new to the idea, or need a refresher, it is always good to start with the basics.

Seven Principles

1. Planning and Design
2. Soil Improvements
3. Efficient Irrigation
4. Turf Planning
5. Mulch
6. Plant Selection
7. Appropriate Maintenance

Peruse your local nurseries or garden catalogs and see what catches your eye and matches your requirements.

Local landscape designers can be of immense help. They can do everything from full design and installation, to offering simple suggestions or cleaning up a design you have already started.

Principle #1:

Planning and Design

Any successful project starts with a good plan. Think about the ways in which you would like to use your landscape and plan accordingly. Turf is usually protocol for play areas. Elegant patios are great for entertaining. Whimsical gardens are perfect for contemplation as you drink your morning coffee. Determine what purpose your landscape will serve for the selected environment.

Analyze the microclimates found in the landscape. Different plants will be needed on the sun baked south side of the area than the sun starved north side.

Sketch out your design. You don't need to be an artist or have your vision fully developed; general categories of heights and plant type will do.

Sometimes the planning process can unnecessarily scare people off. When in doubt, try converting just a small portion of your landscape with your favorite xeric perennials. Use nature's random planting of native flowers as your inspiration.

Principle #2:

Soil Improvements

Unless your property is on converted farmland or near an old riverbed, chances are you have clay soil. Though many xeric plants are adapted to clay soil, the clay soil in our area is often extremely void of organic matter and highly compacted. This makes it difficult for the air and water vital to plant health to penetrate the soil. Adding organic matter such as compost or leaves will improve the soil and make it a more inviting home for your new xeric plants.

Principle #3:

Efficient Irrigation

Without an efficient irrigation system even a perfectly planned xeriscape can be a water waster. The key strategy is to group plants according to their water needs and then install a complementary irrigation system for each particular situation. Drip irrigation works marvelously for trees, shrubs and flowers. A drip system involves a closed system hose with specialized emitters that work by applying calculated amounts of water directly to individual plants. This prevents over-watering and evaporation. Turf areas are usually best watered with a well-designed sprinkler system, though underground drip for turf is gaining in popularity. It is most easily installed prior to laying down turf.



Missouri Evening Primrose



Prairie Winecup



Boulder Blue Fescue



Principle #4: Turf Planning

Despite its bad reputation as a water hog, turf has its place in the landscape. Turf is necessary for areas in which pets and children will play. The key to making turf work in a xeriscape is to limit the amount you plant to what will actually get used – don't treat it like wall to wall carpeting. Many different varieties of turf are available. Do the research and try to find one that is as xeric as possible and will hold up to traffic. When installed make sure to water efficiently using a well-designed irrigation system.

Principle #5: Mulch

Any area not covered by turf in a xeriscape should receive mulch around the plants. Mulches help prevent moisture loss from the soil, provide a decent barrier to weed seeds, and can slowly decompose into organic matter to amend clay soils.

Mulch can often be attained free from city or county yard waste centers. Decorative mulch can also be purchased from garden centers. Beware of big bark mulch in windy environments; it can easily become airborne. Rock or gravel can also be used as mulch but should be avoided in extremely hot areas as a heat-island effect can result.

Principle #6: Plant Selection

Incorporating as many low- water use plants into your landscape as possible will achieve the lowest maintenance and most water efficient xeriscape. There are thousands of varieties to choose from in all plant categories, including evergreens. You can choose plants that are native to the west or exotics from far away places with similar climates. Check with your local extension agent to make sure you aren't planting species that have been added to the local invasive species list.

Principle #7: Appropriate Maintenance

There is no such thing as a maintenance free landscape. Though xeriscapes can be extremely low maintenance, perennials will need to be dead headed, bushes and trees pruned, and an eye kept out for pest problems. It is extremely important to maintain the irrigation system as parts can break or become misplaced.

We've provided the basics and hopefully the inspiration to get started this spring on your xeriscape. More information can be found online, at libraries or from your local extension agent. Conservation Magazine will be bringing you more tips related to each xeriscape principle in upcoming issues.

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