



WHAT EXACTLY IS XERISCAPE.... AND WHY SHOULD IT MATTER?

You may have heard the term *xeriscape* used by local experts touting strategies for how consumers can reduce water usage in their gardens. Based on the most common concerns we hear from local guests, we've come to the conclusion that many people in Utah seem to believe three things when considering a xeriscape space:

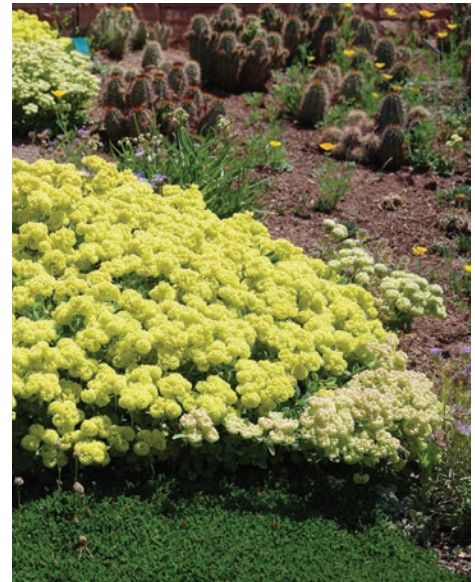
- The entire landscape must be 'xeric' or require no supplemental water
- You'll be limited to sparse plantings with lots of gravel or rock mulch
- And based on the above, you won't like the outcome

The term xeriscape was coined by the Denver Water Board in the 1980s and emphasizes seven principles. We'll discuss each of these in an effort to dispel the myths, because a xeriscape garden can be vibrant and colorful, as well as waterwise.

Planning and Design—As with any landscape project, start with a solid plan and design. Evaluate your site, noting things such as sun or shade exposure, wind exposure, existing elements you want to protect, and what elements you want to incorporate into a new landscape.

Soil Improvements—Determine your existing soil types and add any necessary amendments, such as organic matter or other products, to improve drainage prior to planting a new landscape. Incorporating utilite, expanded shale, or a washed, coarse, angular sand helps improve drainage for desert plants, reducing the potential for rot. For more information on your current soil conditions, consider a home soils test.

Go to: www.usu.edu/analytical-laboratories/tests/home-soil-testing



*Top: Adaptive Beauty view in the
Water Concerotion Garden*

*Bottom: Sulphur buckwheat
(Eriogonum umbellatum) var. polyanthum*



Top: Groundcover Tapestry view in the Water Conservation Garden
Bottom: Pincushion flower (Pterocephalus depressus)

Efficient Irrigation—Whenever possible, design and install your irrigation system along with your planting design. Pay special attention to existing trees to ensure they will continue to get sufficient water. Consider which system types will best provide the necessary water efficiently, such as sprinklers with larger droplet sizes, micro-sprays, bubblers, or drip systems. Avoid sprinklers that create a fine mist. Water infrequently and deeply—between 6 p.m. and 10 a.m.—and irrigate turf and other areas according to their respective water requirements. To establish new plantings, note that regular watering is critical for the first year or two. You can reduce the amount of water supplied once your plantings are established.

Plant Zones—Group plants that have similar requirements, especially water, but also sun and shade. Plants that prefer shady environments are typically best on the north or east side of your home, or near other landscape elements that provide shade. Choose plantings that tolerate full sun for the south or west sides of your home. Plants requiring higher water amounts should be reserved for low drainage areas or near downspouts. Incorporate low-water-use plants in hot, dry, sunny, or windy locations.

Mulches—Using landscape mulches helps lower soil temperatures, and suppresses weeds and reduces water loss. Even better, if a plant-based mulch product is used, organic matter will be increased in the soil as it breaks down. A thickness of 2–3 inches is preferred around perennials, with as much as 4–6 inches around shrubs or trees, keeping the mulch a few inches away from the main trunk. Many xeric/desert plants prefer a gravel or rock mulch as winter moisture held next to their crown can cause them to rot. We don't recommend using landscape fabrics or plastics, which can reduce the ability for water and air to reach plant roots.

Turf Alternatives—Options to consider include reducing the size of your lawn by adding a patio, deck, or other landscape feature, as well as converting lawn to a turf type like tall fescue, buffalo grass, blue grama, or other plantings.

Maintenance—All landscapes, even low-water landscapes, require regular maintenance, such as weeding, annual cut back of herbaceous plants, deadheading spent blooms, pruning, and irrigation repair. Maintenance activities should also include inspection of irrigation systems hidden drip lines, which can become damaged and leak over time.

Most of these are solid, best-practice landscape principles regardless of which type of landscape design you're looking to create. The defining principles of xeriscape are to incorporate plants that require less water, design plantings according to similar water, sun, and shade requirements, and irrigate plants based on their individual needs. This concept of design is called *hydrozoning* and is key to understanding what xeriscape really means. Once you understand that xeriscape isn't what you've been led to believe, then you can begin to take advantage of existing xeriscape resources.

For more information, check out these sites from Denver Water to learn more about the principles and see sample xeriscape plans:

www.denverwater.org/residential/rebates-and-conservation-tips/remodel-your-yard/xeriscape-plans/xeriscape-principles

www.denverwater.org/residential/rebates-and-conservation-tips/remodel-your-yard/xeriscape-plans

Other resources include:

'Waterwise Plants for Sustainable Gardens', by Lauren Springer Ogden and Scott Ogden

'High and Dry, Gardening with Cold-Hardy Dryland Plants', by Robert Nold

www.redbuttegarden.org/gardening-information/horticulture-references

Horticulture Director Marita Teves Tyrolt has been with the Garden since 1994. She has a BA in fine arts from Northern Kentucky University and an Associate's degree in horticulture applied science from Cincinnati Technical School.



The west view in the Water Conservation Garden