

To Xeriscape or Not to Xeriscape

by Joyce Friels, Bell County Master Gardener

We are always coming across the word xeriscape in articles in home and garden magazines and are wondering what it means. Xeriscape gardening is becoming more widely used in Central Texas as the weather seems to be getting hotter and our daily schedules seem to be getting more time consuming. Usually our first thought when we see the word xeriscape, is to see a landscape planted with drought tolerant grasses, an assortment of cacti, rocks, and big boulders that gives a definite desert look to the landscape. That is not what a xeriscape is. A xeriscape is a way to convert a regular looking landscape into a professional looking low maintenance landscape. By following seven basic steps your landscape can be transformed into a beautiful xeriscape.

Making a Plan and Getting Started: The value of a plan is that you have to think about what will work for you. Don't go digging up your lawn and shrubs that are already in your landscape until you have put a plan down on paper to see what will work best for your lifestyle. The plan will need to contain elements that will be easy to maintain and one that will be colorful and pretty to look at. You will need to decide where you want this xeriscape. Do you and your family spend more time in the front yard or in the back yard? If the front yard is only to frame your house and present your home attractively, then you could consider limiting the lawn area to low shrubbery and a few native plantings. Also, an important consideration in this plan is to think about your budget. Don't go overboard. Keep in mind that in order to accomplish your goals in creating a xeriscape landscape, you need to be realistic about the amount of time it will take. That is why this first planning step is so important. A good rule of thumb is to make a plan that will let you make additions to the landscape over several months. Look at other landscapes in your neighborhood or take a drive through a newly landscaped residential area. Always include the whole family in the planning phase. Sketch out the plan noting any drainage problems or significant contours of the property. Experiment with different layouts looking at the private, public, and service areas around your house that you might want to incorporate into the overall design.

Reducing Lawn Area: You can reduce high water-use areas by replacing some of the lawn with plants, flagstone, bricks, or "kid friendly" surfaces. In play areas, under swing sets and other play ground equipment, consider using shredded pine, pine needles, or coarse builders. sand. Use flag stone or bricks at the junction of a flower bed and a driveway or a walkway to soften the hard edges. This gives the eye a continuous path to follow making the landscape more appealing.

Soil Preparation: Adding four inches of compost to a flower bed helps create a good balance of moisture retentive material and aeration which is essential for growing healthy plants.

Efficient Watering: If you don't have an in-ground sprinkler system, don't think you need one to have a nice green lawn. Most sprinkler systems waste water because the water jets are not properly positioned thus letting water run onto sidewalks and into the street. If you already have a sprinkler system check the position and angle the water takes. Is it falling back onto the lawn? To efficiently water shrubbery and flower beds use either soaker hoses or a drip system. When soaker hoses are placed in the flower beds and around the shrubbery the water soaks into the ground slowly and goes to the root system of the plants where it is needed. The drip irrigation system works on the same principle by concentrating the water on each plant or bush. Both methods eliminate evaporation and run off.

Using Mulch: Applying three to four inches of mulch around each plant, covering the watering system, and the entire surface of the planting bed does two important things. The mulch cover helps retain much needed moisture and helps eliminate nuisance weeds.

Planting Well Adapted Plants: Included in your initial plan should be a selection of well adapted plants. Look for native plants as they will provide color, long bloom time, and are low maintenance. There are numerous native plantings now available in area nurseries. Include perennials and some annuals to add color and variety. Annuals are easy to pull out and replace with other varieties. Ground covers offer a good balance of color and texture. After a season or two you will be able to recognize other plants that will do well in your particular circumstance.

Maintenance: Remember, "the best laid plans of mice and men". Without dedicated maintenance your new xeriscape can turn into a neglected eyesore of a mess. You can maintain your new landscape easily and at less cost to you if you follow these recommendations for xeriscape gardening.

When you reduce lawn area, plant native plants and shrubs, enrich the soil with compost, use mulch to retain moisture in the soil you are creating an environmentally friendly landscape. A xeriscape is a great way to have a beautiful yard and keep maintenance costs low. Start planning so that you can enjoy this new way of gardening!