# Basic Principles of Xeriscaping

**Water conservation is becoming a very important consideration when gardening in the Western US. Back in 1981, an environmental planner for the Denver Water Department coined the word "Xeriscape" (from the Greek word xeri for dry, needing little water) t**

Water conservation is becoming a very important consideration when gardening in the Western US. Back in 1981, an environmental planner for the Denver Water Department coined the word “Xeriscape” (from the Greek word xeri for dry, needing little water) to embody the principles of water conservation through creative landscaping.

Briefly, here are the basic principles of water wise landscaping:

1. Planning and Design.

Whether you’re starting from scratch, or renovating an existing landscape, take the time to plan out your design before you start to plant. Create different water use zones and allocate the water where it will most directly contribute to the beauty and comfort of your home.

2. Create Practical Turf Areas.

Limit the size of lawn areas and use native grasses as much as possible. Buffalo Grass is an excellent drought-tolerant alternative to thirsty Kentucky Blue Grass.

3. Use Appropriate Plants.

Use xeric plants for hot, dry south and west facing areas. Use plants that like more moisture along north and east facing slopes and walls. Don’t mix plants with high and low watering needs in the same planting area.

4. Improve the Soil.

Add organic matter in the form of compost whenever you plant. This helps the soil hold extra moisture.

5. Use Mulches.

By covering the soil’s surface with some type of mulch, you help retain valuable soil moisture. Mulching also helps capture rainwater by allowing hard rains to soak into the soil instead of running off into the street and drainage areas.

6. Irrigate Efficiently.

Don’t over-water. Use soaker hoses and drip irrigation to water deeply and encourage deep root growth.

7. Capture Rain and Snow Run Off.

Use rain barrels and cisterns to capture water draining off roofs. Run-off from paved areas can be directed back onto the landscape to water trees, shrubs and flower beds.

8. Maintain Your Landscape and Garden Properly.

Keep irrigation systems running properly. Avoid the lush, thirsty plant growth that results from over-fertilizing.

Articles Index

Our free catalog has a wide selection of

water-wise plants for the Western garden

# Planting Success in Low Maintenance Situations

**Landscape a vacation home where plants do not receive much care to help them get established.**

Summer vacations are on everyone’s minds this time of year. For many folks that involves traveling to their vacation homes. Over the years, I have had many questions regarding how to landscape a vacation home where the owner is often absent and the plants do not receive much care to help them get established.

Establishing a new planting where watering is infrequent can be a real challenge. It is not a good idea to plant in the months just before summer when dry, hot weather is sure to follow. For many areas of the country, I would suggest fall planting to allow the winter rains to keep the new plants irrigated and help them to establish roots before next summer.

A simple battery operated water timer with a temporary drip system can make the difference between success and failure for areas of the country that don’t get regular summer rains. Dripworks (dripworks.com) comes well recommended as a mail-order source for your drip irrigation supplies.

When possible, plant in low areas that collect run-off moisture from the surrounding terrain or near the house where run-off from the roof can be directed toward the plantings. Shallow ditches that follow the contours of slopes and hills make ideal planting sites. Pile the soil on the down-hill side to help increase the water holding capacity of the ditch as rain water and snow melt run downhill into it.. All these techniques will increase the amount of water plants get throughout the year thereby increasing their chances for long-term survival.

Because browsing animals are a definite hazard in rural areas, select plants that do not attract them. Consider plants that are also xeric and low maintenance. Fortunately there are some excellent plant choices that meet all these criteria.

I would suggest the following:

1. For early spring color an assortment of early mid- and late-blooming Daffodils would be excellent. Daffodils are also safe from burrowing pests like gophers, moles and voles.
2. For color from late spring through late summer Achillea “Moonshine” (Moonshine Yarrow), Perovskia atriplicifolia (Russian Sage), Salvia nemerosa “May Night”, Salvia greggii “Furman’s Red”, various Lavandula species (Lavender), Agastache rupestris\* (Licorice Mint Hyssop), Teucrium aroanium (Gray Creeping Germander), Santolina chamaedryoides (Gray Santolina) and Penstemon pinifolius\* (Pineleaf Beardtongue), Penstemon cardinalis\* (Cardinal Beardtongue) are recommended. This is a good core group of xeric plants. (\* not favored by deer in NM and CO and worth a try in your area.)
3. Woody shrubs are also an integral part of any naturalized landscape. Artemisia tridentata (Big Sage), Chrysothamnus nauseosus (Rabbit Brush), Chamaebatiera millifolium (Fernbush), and Mahonia hamatocarpa (Red berry Mahonia) are all good choices.

Young plants should be covered with chicken-wire cylinders that are staked to the ground to protect them until well established. Plants straight from the nursery have not been grow “hard” and have not fully developed the chemicals in their leaves and stems that make them unpalatable to animals.

Deer Off is a more aesthetically pleasing way to repel browsing animals but requires that you remember to re-apply it to new growth throughout the growing season and just before the onset of winter.

Trees should have their trunks wrapped with tree wrap in the fall and unwrapped in late spring. This protects the barks for winter sunburn and damage from feeding rabbits under the cover of snow.

Getting plants off to a good start begins with the planting hole. Mixing a good quality compost into the soil improves the soil’s water-holding capacity and encourages strong root growth. Also add Broadleaf P-4 water holding crystals into the planting hole as they help hold water in the root zone and protects plants from dry conditions for the first two growing seasons (until their roots grow beyond the original planting hole). After planting, mulch around the base of the new transplants shades the soil and keeps it cooler and moister.