

XERISCAPE LANDSCAPING - A PERFECT ALTERNATIVE FOR OUR CLIMATE

By Marina Phillips

The term Xeriscape means “water conservation through creative landscaping”. The technique emphasizes efficient use of water so that less is required to sustain an attractive and functional landscape. It also makes use of native plants, shrubs and trees that take advantage of our semi-arid desert climate. Not only does this method add beauty and colour to your landscaping while minimizing water requirements, it also takes far less maintenance.

Xeriscaping is based on seven interrelated principles. In many ways these principles are just overall good gardening practice. They can be applied to whatever extent feels comfortable, and to the degree that suits your basic landscape.

- 1. PLANNING AND DESIGN:** A successful Xeriscape requires a well-thought-out plan. With planning you determine how you use your garden, identify conditions that will influence water use and go over the problems and potentials of your property.
- 2. SOIL IMPROVEMENT:** Soil conditions are critical in the success of a Xeriscape. Soil must provide support, air, water and nutrients to the plants or they will weaken. Some tips for soil improvement include using sand to increase drainage, using peat moss, manure or compost to improve moisture retention and using fertilizer carefully for strong root growth.
- 3. APPROPRIATE PLANT SELECTION:** Plants must be selected to suit the climatic and microclimate conditions, the intended function, the soil characteristics and the intended water use at the planting site. Plants should be grouped according to water needs, and you can choose from trees, shrubs, perennials, annuals, ornamental grasses, ground covers, bulbs or vines.
- 4. PRACTICAL TURF AREAS:** Conventional lawns consume high amounts of water, and many lawns are much larger than required, composed of high water demand grasses. It is possible to have a lawn and conserve significant amounts of water by sizing the lawn to meet your practical requirements. Eliminate grass in narrow strips and unusable areas, and plant shrubs or ground cover. Using dry land grasses in less critical areas is also a good Xeriscaping technique.
- 5. EFFICIENT IRRIGATION:** Efficient irrigation means applying the amount of water that is required by a plant, when it is required, where it is required and with minimal wastage. Daily watering is rarely necessary except for with free-standing planters. Watering once a week, even grass, is sufficient if the water is applied to the depth of the root zone. Water should also be applied at a rate at which it can be absorbed by the soil. Don't just "set it and forget it". If you have an automatically controlled system, adjust watering frequency and duration with the changing seasons - watering at the same frequency in April as in July is not efficient.
- 6. MULCHES:** Mulches are applied to the soil surface to reduce evaporation, to moderate soil temperature and reduce plant water use. Mulches also control weed growth and erosion. Bark mulch should only be used in areas where it is contained by curbing, to prevent heavy rains from washing it away, which can plug up city drains and contribute to flooding problems.

7. APPROPRIATE MAINTENANCE: The amount of maintenance required in a garden is related to the amount of water applied. Over-watering contributes to rapid, weak plant growth, fertilizer leaching, insect or disease problems, and weed growth, all of which require maintenance. If water is efficiently applied in a garden, and Xeriscape principles are used, less maintenance will be required.

Using a variety of flowers, colours and interesting plants will make a Xeriscape just as attractive and functional as a traditional landscape, and water consumption can be reduced by up to 50% or more. Xeriscape gardening usually requires less fertilizer, less pruning, and less mowing, leaving more time for you to enjoy the garden rather than working in it.

The Medicine Hat College Horticultural Department are putting together a model Xeriscape that should be ready for viewing in the College courtyard in September. If you are a gardener and want to incorporate some of these ideas in your yard, don't miss it! There is also information about it at the Medicine Hat Public Library and on the Internet.

Happy Xeriscaping, all!