Landscapes for Life in the Desert

Whether you have lived here all your life or you have just moved from across the country, creating a landscape in the desert can be a challenging and exciting experience. A beautiful, easy care yard can bring you hours of enjoyment and can provide you with a lovely place to relax, entertain and spend time with family and friends.

Warm, sunny days and a year-round growing season provide gardeners with the opportunity to use a wide array of plants. You can achieve different looks to suit your taste, and your yard can serve a variety of functions that match your lifestyle. Landscaping can also help to decrease some of the harsh effects of our desert climate, as plants and other landscape components provide shade, increase the energy efficiency of our homes and extend our living space from the indoors to the outdoors.

However, the same climate that offers many choices also presents us with a special challenge. Because we live in the Sonoran Desert, we must use water wisely. Selecting low water use plants and using water efficient irrigation techniques will help you get the most from the water used to establish and maintain your landscape.

In the Sonoran Desert, many people call water efficient, creative landscapes Xeriscapes. This term comes from the Greek word xeris, which means dry, and refers to seven horticultural principles which help to ensure that landscapes, wherever they are located, reflect a sensitivity to the local environment and its climate. By using the Xeriscape principles, you can identify landscape options, express your creativity and, at the same time, be mindful and respectful of our unique desert environment.

This guide will provide the kind of information needed to plan, install and care for a Xeriscape. It is filled with ideas, instructions, tips and illustrations to help you create a landscape that will beautify your home and meet your recreational needs. The guide is organized into four sections, each covering a different aspect of the Xeriscape process. You can read the guide all at once or refer to specific sections as needed. An extensive list of resources is located at the end of the guide. It provides suggested reading material, websites, telephone numbers for organizations that offer information on Xeriscape, and places to visit to learn more about Xeriscape.

You may already have an established landscape and are reading this guide with the idea of converting your water intensive landscape to a Xeriscape or of modifying your existing Xeriscape to enhance its beauty, functionality or water efficiency. This guide is for you too. All of the steps included in the guide can be directly applied or modified to plan and incorporate changes into existing landscapes.

Using the Xeriscape Principles to Create Beautiful, Healthy, Water Efficient Gardens

**The Xeriscape Principles**

1. **Good Landscape Planning and Design**
   Creating a plan will help you get the most out of your landscape while considering issues like cost, function, aesthetic preferences, maintenance requirements, water efficiency, and energy efficiency. You can tailor the plan to suit your taste, your needs, and your checkbook. The plan will serve as a guide throughout the landscaping process. It will help you stay focused and help to avoid time-consuming and costly mistakes. When developing a plan, think long-term. You may decide to complete your landscape all at once or in stages. Regardless of your approach, take the time to develop a complete plan for your yard.

2. **Low Water Use Plants**
   There are hundreds of water-thrifty native or desert-adapted plant species available at local nurseries. Some varieties have been available for many years, while others are new on the market. They come in all shapes and sizes and serve a variety of purposes from shade to seasonal color to screening unsightly areas. Many low water use plants have beautiful flowers or interesting forms. They will help you create a
colorful, low-maintenance yard without taxing our limited water resources.

3. Appropriate Turf Areas
Although turf generally requires more water and more maintenance than low water use plants, sometimes only grass will do, especially if you are sports-minded or if there are children or pets at home. Small turf areas can be incorporated successfully into a Xeriscape if they are properly planned, installed and maintained.

4. Efficient Irrigation
In the Sonoran Desert, almost all new plants should be watered regularly to get them established; and most plants, low water use or not, need some kind of irrigation even after they become mature. The trick is to find out how much water your plants require and to apply only that much. When you design your irrigation system, try to put trees, shrubs, groundcovers and turf areas each on different valves so you can time their irrigations separately. Most plants will need more frequent irrigations during their first year. Usually, you can cut back on watering during the second and subsequent years, after the plants have become established. Also remember that plants need less water during the cooler months. Adjust your irrigation schedule at least four times each year.

5. Soil Improvements
Most low water use plants thrive naturally in our desert soils, so amendments such as fertilizers and soil supplements are usually not necessary. They do prefer good drainage, and soil should be loosened at planting time to encourage healthy root growth. Soil amendments most likely will be needed for turf areas and areas where more water thirsty plants are installed. Because there is quite a variation in soil quality and composition across the Sonoran Desert, soil amendments may be needed when unusual conditions exist. For more information about your specific soil type and about the possible need for soil improvements, contact your County Cooperative Extension office.

6. Use of Mulches
Mulches cover the soil and reduce evaporation from planted areas. They cool the soil beneath and also help to inhibit weed growth and erosion. There are organic mulches and inorganic mulches. The most popular organic mulches in our area are bark chips and wood grindings. These are often used in planting beds and other small areas. The natural drop of leaves, flowers and fruit can also be left on the ground as mulch. Decomposed granite and crushed rock are two of the most popular inorganic mulches.

7. Appropriate Maintenance
When properly designed and maintained, Xeriscape lawns save water, time and money through reduced plant water needs and lower maintenance requirements. But low water use and low maintenance do not mean no water use and no maintenance. All landscapes need some care and most plants need supplemental water in our desert environment. Proper pruning techniques can keep your yard beautiful and natural looking and save you trips to the landfill. A well-maintained irrigation system can keep plants healthy and water use low. Prudent use of fertilizers will help to avoid excessive plant growth which, in turn, will reduce water use and the need for excessive pruning.

A beautiful mix of colors – Lantana (purple and yellow), Cherry Sage (red plants by windows), Desert Spoon (foreground)