



FROM A GARDENING PERSPECTIVE...

XERISCAPE PLANTS: Choices and Maintenance

By

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By definition, **Xeriscape** is a landscape method that uses very little water and plants that do well in drought situations. People tend to call it “Zero” scape, but it is xeriscape. There is no such thing as “Zero” scape. All plants require water, especially when newly planted. Xeric plants just don’t need as much and can go longer periods without any water. Since the drought in Palo Pinto County has been taking a toll on the water available for watering landscapes, xeriscape is a great direction to go. After learning some basic xeriscape practices, anyone can have a low water landscape which requires much less work.

The first step is to drastically reduce grass lawns. Grass requires too much precious water. If a small space of grass is desired, then bermuda, buffalo grass, blue grama, curly mesquite or a combination of these can be installed. After it is established, this type of lawn requires almost no supplemental water. If a homeowner can find a way to fill the old lawn area with plantings of native perennials, then that is even better. These beds might be arranged to catch rain from the roof or run off from the drive.

When new beds are created, weed block fabric or layers of newspaper should be placed to cover the surface of the beds. That should be covered with mulch of some kind. This helps keep weeds down and retain the moisture in the soil. If seeds will be used to start new plants, a space should be left uncovered by weed block and mulch so that the seeds can sprout.

Palo Pinto County actually has free wood mulch that can be picked up at the precinct barns. It is necessary to call ahead to a precinct barn, ask if there is mulch available and provide one’s own truck. The precinct will fill the truck with its equipment.

Using a variety of mulches will add interest to the landscape. Wood mulches are good, but should be kept away from the perimeter of the house (think wildfire prevention). Pine bark, native hardwood, cedar, and cypress are a few good ones. They should be layered several inches thick. Rocks make great mulch. Pea gravel, river rock, crushed rock, or a combination can make a visual impact. Rock actually does a great job of retaining the moisture and weeds are easily seen and removed. Stepping

stones fit right in too. Rubber mulch is another solution for small areas. It should be installed with some sort of boundary material so the mulch will stay put.

Choosing plants for a xeriscape can be lots of fun. Often, plants with gray foliage do well in a dry climate, and using green around them really sets them off. Cactus come in all shapes and sizes and looks great in rock mulch. The red yucca is good and there is a new variety called Brake Lights that is much more red and grows in a more upright habit. Some larger shrubs or small trees that do well are Mexican Bird of Paradise, Desert Willows and Mesquite. Ash junipers(cedar), which have invaded thousands of acres, use up massive amounts of the ground water and are fuel for fires. A beautiful specimen might be kept at least 30 feet from the house, but the rest should really be cut down.

All types of salvias do well with little water, as do iris, daylily, canna, lantana and rosemary. Society Garlic makes great borders and coneflower and columbine provide beautiful flowers. These and many more plants fit the xeriscape method. They will all need some water when first planted but not much after the first year or two. A good rule of thumb is to water once a month the first year if it doesn't rain. In order to do this, you will need to be catching water from your shower or runoff from the roof or any number of other ways.

The Palo Pinto County Master Gardeners can teach you what you need to know. Starting on April 11, the Boyce Ditto Public Library will be hosting a series of talks by Master Gardeners on how to deal with drought. Keep an eye on the newspaper for details or call the Palo Pinto Agri-life Extension Office at 940-659-1228.