

Xeriscaping in the Northwest

Xeriscaping is the creation and maintenance of a water-conserving, environmentally sound landscape. It is a sustainable landscape – requiring minimal labor, water, fertilizer and pesticides. Although xeriscaping is usually associated with dry, southwest climates, it is equally important in the Northwest, where summer months are dry and droughts do occur. Only one year ago, our mountain snow pack was 50-60% of normal, causing record low flows on more than 30 rivers. Water is a valuable resource and we should all do our part to conserve it. The following guidelines will help in this effort:



Achillea millefolium 'Cerise Queen'

Good Landscapes Start with Good Planning

Determine what you need from your landscape and how much time you want to spend on maintenance. Take into consideration all of your outdoor living needs: gardening, entertaining, play, storage, public, work, and service areas. Also consider the views you want to enhance or screen and your plan's effect on your neighbors.

Design Your Landscape with Current and Future Needs in Mind

Do a site analysis and prepare a site map to scale. Along with the location of the house, fences and walls – be certain to map out trees and shrubs for their future, mature size. Locate your microclimates. In general, south and west facing areas are usually hot and dry, north and northeast areas are usually moist and cool. Areas protected by trees, fences, and buildings create microclimates.

A water-efficient landscape is not strictly made up of low-water plants, but a combination of plants put in the "right place". For this reason, think in terms of "water use areas" as you design your landscape:

- Very Low Water Use – for hot and dry areas such as rock gardens.
- Low Water Use – for moist and cool areas.
- Moderate to High Water Use – areas such as lawns.

Incorporate raised beds in your design for improved drainage, easy maintenance, and visual interest. Also, keep in mind that landscape development can be a long-term process.

Amend and Improve Your Soil

Amending with organic material improves soil aeration, soil health, and water-holding capacity. Improved soil helps plants develop deep root systems to withstand drought stress. Amend your soil prior to installing irrigation systems – to avoid damaging the system.

Apply Mulch



Origanum rotundifolium 'Kent Beauty'

Mulch minimizes moisture evaporation, keeps the soil cool, reduces weeds, and slows down water to prevent runoff. Mulching with compost also adds a great source of slow release nutrients to the soil. Mulch can be organic, such as bark, straw, grass clippings, pine needles, or compost. Mulch can also include inorganic materials such as gravel.

Water Wisely

Don't over-water. This washes away soil, pesticides, and nutrients – which eventually find their way into surface water and/or groundwater. Do water thoroughly and less frequently, keeping in mind your soil type. Consider trickle or drip irrigation systems, which can reduce water use by 50% to 80% compared with overhead irrigation. Built-in irrigation systems should have separate circuits for lawn and planting beds. Avoid irrigation runoff by watering with sprinklers, watering slowly, and adjusting sprinkler patterns.

Keep Lawns to a Minimum

Xeriscaping limits lawns to small areas – usually near the house where they get the most use. When a lawn is necessary, use native grasses which are tougher and require less water and maintenance. Minimize your use of a lawn as a "ground cover". Consider reducing lawn areas by using paths, mulched areas, and low-water, low-maintenance ground covers.

Plant Selection – Placing the Right Plant in the Right Place

There are many attractive, drought-tolerant plants – both native and non-native. Get to know the characteristics of drought-tolerant plants, both for sun and dry shade areas. Place plants in landscape situations that are similar to their natural habitat. Northwest native plants are a great choice for the following reasons:

- They are acclimated to local weather patterns. Once established, they need little water other than rainfall.
- They withstand typical drought cycles. During extreme droughts they should be monitored for signs of stress and watered accordingly.
- They are resistant to plant diseases common to the region.
- Their roots systems are suitable for our soil conditions.
- They provide a natural habitat for birds, bees, butterflies, and other beneficial insects.

Putting the above xeriscaping guidelines into practice will ensure we are creating water-conserving, environmentally sound landscapes.



Lavendula stoechas (Spanish Lavender),
Achillea filipendulina 'Coronation Gold', and
Achillea kellereri



Arctostaphylos uva-ursi (Kinnikinnick)

Resources

[Your Yard and Water Quality: Simple Things Gardeners Can Do To Prevent Water Contamination](#). WSU Agricultural Bulletin EB1744.

Drought Alert, Living with Water Conservation. WSU Cooperative Extension Office Publication.

[Raised Bed Gardening](#). Washington State University Spokane County Extension.