

Xeriscape ... Landscape Article #6
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The high desert landscape of northern Nevada is one of beauty and intrigue. Our sagebrush community is spotted with bright yellow mule's ear, deep blue lupine, and vibrant Indian paintbrush. The pine forests offer crisp white yarrow, yampa, and the red of the endangered snow plant. With less than 9" of annual rainfall our deserts manage to bloom with dazzling color from spring to fall.

Our minimal rainfall is an important fact to consider when planning your landscape. The unpredictable weather in northern Nevada leaves us wondering each year if we will meet our annual water needs or be headed towards spells of drought. We can prepare for these dry spells by designing our landscapes with drought tolerant, water-wise plants, using an efficient irrigation design, and properly maintaining our landscapes. This practice is commonly known as xeriscape.

To begin the xeriscape process start taking notice of the many native plants available that will provide color, year round interest and be water-wise. If you need help, check Moana Nursery's website for a list of water-wise plants or visit Truckee Meadows Water Authority website for their **Landscaping in the Truckee Meadows** brochure.

One important aspect of designing your xeriscape is identifying the needs of the plants you have chosen to use. As you read about the plants you are considering, make lists of those with similar requirements (ex: sun, shade, moderate water, etc.). Now you can group your plants by need and place them on your drawing, or in your yard, in the same manner. This step is actually defining the hydrozones you will be using for irrigation. Doing this allows you to irrigate more effectively by grouping plants with high water demands dedicated to one zone and those with lesser water needs on a separate zone. Consequently, all your plants will receive the water they require without over watering to compensate for some or putting stress on others by under watering them. A good plan keeps more densely planted, water loving plants near the home and disperses the plant groupings as they move towards property lines, limiting the water used in the background.

Before planting, it is important that you amend your soil with organic material such as a quality compost or planting mix. These amendments add nutrients that are lacking in our soil, improve its structure which improves drainage and ultimately improves the health of your plants; water conservation also is provided by the ability of organic material to retain moisture.

Once plants have been placed and irrigation hydrozones established, it's time to add mulch – another important part of the xeriscape design. Organic mulch, like compost or composted bark, reduces the amount of water evaporation from your soil (a 3" layer of mulch will reduce water usage by 30%). It improves the quality of your soil by breaking up clay and allowing better water and air movement through the soil. It provides nutrients to sandy soil and improves its ability to hold water. Mulch acts as an insulation layer on top of soil, keeping it cool in the summer and protecting roots from cold in winter. And mulch keeps weeds down.

Remember that xeriscape can include turf areas. To maintain the theme of a water-wise landscape, choose your turf area based on necessity instead of size. Turf can be a great addition to a home landscape – a place for children to play, animals to run, or just a small splash of green in the landscape. Depending on the shape and size of your yard there are new irrigation technologies that can assist you with your water conservation needs. New spray heads and subsurface irrigation options allow water to be used more efficiently and dramatically increase the effectiveness of the water being applied to the lawn. For more information on water efficient irrigation, check with your local nursery or irrigation supplier.

Lastly, there is no such thing as a maintenance-free yard and xeriscape is no exception. A yard with plants and irrigation requires regular maintenance. When turning your system on in the spring, check for leaks, broken and misdirected sprinkler heads and leaky o-rings on your hose bibs. All should be corrected before turning your system on for the season and then checked monthly throughout the season. Maintain your plants by pruning trees, deadheading flowers, and controlling weed and pest problems. A simple regular maintenance routine will make your xeriscape look lush and inviting in the surrounding desert, help improve your home's value, and conserve your water.