What is Xeriscape?

The natural landscapes of New Mexico are as varied as they are beautiful. But our state’s arid climate and limited rainfall can vary throughout the state, New Mexico averages less than 13 inches of rainfall per year.

Because of our state’s climate, xeriscape is designed to be water-efficient, landscaping appropriate to the natural environment.

The term xeriscape is derived from the Greek word arid, which means dry. The goal of xeriscape is to create a visually attractive landscape that uses plants adapted for their water efficiency. Properly maintained, a xeriscape can use less than one-third of the water of a traditional landscape.

In New Mexico, water-conserving landscaping is the natural choice.

Xeriscaping vs. Zero-scaping

Many people confuse xeriscaping with "zero-scaping." While both of these landscapes use less water than the traditional, turf-dominated approach, they are totally different in appearance and appeal. Xeriscaping is lush and beautiful. Zero-scaping tends to be hot and less interesting.

Xeriscaping uses a wide variety of water-efficient plants to create an aesthetically pleasing landscape. Xeriscaping uses lots of rocks and usually a few plants to create a visually attractive landscape.

Xeriscaping makes an area colorful and interesting. For New Mexico, it’s a water smart and attractive way to landscape.

The Advantages of Xeriscape

Xeriscaping saves water. Using native and other drought-tolerant plants can significantly reduce water use. Xeriscaping saves time. It de-emphasizes the use of bluegrass lawns and other thirsty plants. This conservation approach can reduce the time you spend watering, fertilizing and mowing.

Xeriscaping saves money. Reducing water use can lower your water bill. Xeriscaping can also reduce maintenance costs and increase the beauty and value of your property.

Watering Tips

Here are some handy tips that can help create a successful xeric landscape.

• Know your plants. Learn how much water they need, and don’t overwater!
• Water lawns during the cooler morning hours to avoid excessive evaporation.
• For water-wise trees and plants, convert to drip irrigation, which is usually more efficient than traditional sprinklers.
• Hiring a landscape professional is probably the best way to completely convert an existing landscape to xeriscaping. However, with a proper plan, xeriscaping your yard in stages can be an enjoyable "do-it-yourself" project.

Xeriscape Tips

Here are some handy tips that can help create a successful xeric landscape.

• Newly planted xeriscapes require additional water in the first year or two. After plants are established, water less.
• Consider converting to water-wise grasses. Native and low-water-use species such as blue grama and buffalo grass need far less water than bluegrasses.
• Xeriscaping should have to be an "all or nothing" proposition. After completing your landscape plan, you can convert to low-water-use plants one zone or area at a time.
• Hiring a landscape professional is probably the best way to completely convert an existing landscape to xeriscaping. However, with a proper plan, xeriscaping your yard in stages can be an enjoyable "do-it-yourself" project.

Plants for Natural Gardens

Suggested reading

• Natural by Design: A Guide to Water-wise Landscaping in New Mexico
• The Enchanted Xeriscape

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Curtis Smith, Cooperative Extension Service; David Cristiani, landscape designer and consultant; Judith Phillips, Bernardo Beach Native Plant Farm; Melba Teller; Carol Schuette Ostrom; and Hope Redd. Santa Fe Xeriscape Council; Pat Gold, Arrow Construction Services; and Dean River, Living Desert State Park.

State Engineer Office

Funded by the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission.
What is Xeriscape?

Landscape appropriate to the needs of the area makes sense. Xeriscape can reduce water use by as much as 75 percent when compared with a traditional landscape. Although rainfall can vary throughout the state, New Mexico averages less than 13 inches of rainfall per year. The natural landscapes of New Mexico are as varied as they are beautiful. But the precious water that supports these landscapes must come from irrigation–lots of irrigation. That's why it's important for New Mexicans to rethink lawns. Instead of using a lawn to cover large areas, choose your lawn size and type to fit your family's needs. Drought-tolerant grasses such as buffalo grass and blue grama grass may be substituted for water-hungry bluegrass in many situations. Consider reducing the size of your lawn and planting water-wise groundcovers and shrubs instead.

Xeriscaping is lush and beautiful. Zero-scaping is not. Although many people confuse xeriscaping with zero-scaping, they are totally different in appearance. Xeriscaping means reducing water use. Zero-scaping means getting rid of all plants and relying solely on rocks and mulch. In xeriscaping, you may still have a lawn, but you choose the types of plants that can survive with less water, and you choose a planting design to meet your needs. Xeriscaping can save money. Many people don't realize that irrigation constitutes one of the two greatest expenses of home ownership. Xeriscaping can reduce water use. Low-water-use plants should be grouped together, away from high water-use plants and turf. Take advantage of warm or cool “microclimates” that exist in different areas around your property. Water-wise lawns and plants need less water than thirsty grasses and plants. Including both less water use and native plantings, a properly designed xeriscape can significantly reduce a traditional landscape’s water use.

The Principles of Xeriscaping

Planning and Design

A beautiful xeriscape starts with a good design. The physical characteristics of the site should be considered, and so should your needs and your aesthetic preferences. For example, here are a few of the considerations:

• Size—What portion of the property receives sunlight? What portion receives morning sun and afternoon shade? The amount and type of sun will affect the types of plants you choose.

• Functions—Do you want an outdoor living area? If so, consider expanding the patio area with additional shade structures and low-water-use trees to provide privacy.

• Values—Are there trees you want to protect or screen? Know the mature size of the plants you want to include in your landscape design or call upon a landscape design professional, a properly designed xeriscape will affect the types of plants you choose.

• Sun—Do you want your yard to stay green and healthy. The difference in moisture needs together in specific “zones,” your landscape can use water more efficiently than traditional sprinklers. For the most efficient use of water, irrigate turf areas with low-volume drip emitters, sprayers and bubblers. Trees, shrubs, flowers and groundcovers can be watered efficiently with low-volume drip emitters, sprayers and bubblers. Water deeply but less frequently, keeping in mind the needs of specific soils, plants and watering systems.

Mulching

Mulches save the soil and maintains moisture, heat and so should be reduced to low-water-use plants because they use less water than turf. Protect shrubs, flowers and groundcovers can be watered efficiently with low-volume drip emitters, sprayers and bubblers.

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Creating Your Xeriscape

Zone 1 Arid

Zone 2 Transition

Zone 3 Mini-Oasis

Transition – Zone 2
This intermediate zone takes advantage of low and moderate-water-use plants. The transition zone is used to blend harsh areas with the more open parts of the landscape. These plants need infrequent supplemental watering (usually once a week or less).

Mini-Oasis – Zone 3
Your “outdoor living room” where you spend the most time should be in or near a mini-oasis. This is the area nearest to the house where the highest water-use plants are closely grouped, creating the lushest zone. This mini-oasis zone includes the lawn area (if any) – which is typically the highest water-use area. This zone also includes the shady north and east sides of a house – which are usually the coolest parts of the site. Anywhere water collects off of roof or at the base of a slope can be turned into a mini-oasis.

Selecting the Right Plants
Based upon your local climate (see the New Mexico Climate Areas map below) and the water-use zones you’d like to create in your landscape plan, you’ll need to select the appropriate plants. Use these three regional lists as a starting point.

Please keep in mind that this is merely a small sampling of plants that will grow in the various areas and zones. There are literally hundreds of species that grow and thrive in New Mexico. For more information about additional plants to meet your landscape requirements, contact a local nursery or landscape professional.

New Mexico Climate Areas
Several factors influence regional and local climatic conditions. These include latitude, elevation, terrain, exposure and precipitation. Although there is no foolproof way to completely account for these variations, this map can serve as an aid to determining the appropriate plants and trees for your location.

Zone 1: Drought-tolerant plants – water only rarely

Perennials and groundcovers: Blanket Flower, Common Yarrow, Desert Thistle, Doughveld, Goldilocks, Great Plumeless, Golden Lacebark, Hesperaloe, Indian Grass, Little Bluestem, Mountain Mahogany, Partially Dwarfed Russian Sage, Piñon, Russian Sage, Tamarisk, Tumbleweed, Upright Desert Yucca, Yucca Flaccida

Zone 2: Water-wise plants – water infrequently

Perennials and groundcovers: Blanket Flower, Common Yarrow, Desert Thistle, Doughveld, Goldilocks, Great Plumeless, Golden Lacebark, Hesperaloe, Indian Grass, Little Bluestem, Mountain Mahogany, Partially Dwarfed Russian Sage, Piñon, Russian Sage, Tamarisk, Tumbleweed, Upright Desert Yucca, Yucca Flaccida

Zone 3: Mini-oasis plants – regular supplemental water

Perennials and groundcovers: Blanket Flower, Common Yarrow, Desert Thistle, Doughveld, Goldilocks, Great Plumeless, Golden Lacebark, Hesperaloe, Indian Grass, Little Bluestem, Mountain Mahogany, Partially Dwarfed Russian Sage, Piñon, Russian Sage, Tamarisk, Tumbleweed, Upright Desert Yucca, Yucca Flaccida

New Mexico Xeriscape
One of the keys to creating a successful xeriscape is planning for different areas of landscape use. By planting plants into specific zones based upon the functions you want your yard to serve and the water needs of the plants you select, you can create a water-efficient landscape that is both beautiful and functional.

Typically, there are three xeriscape zones: Arid, transition and mini-oasis.

Arid – Zone 1
For areas far from the house and removed from the most active areas of the landscape, Zone 1 landscaping features the most drought-tolerant vegetation. Choose native plants and other varieties that only rarely require supplemental watering. Rainwater can be directed toward these same plants with land contouring to provide virtually all the water they need once the plants are well established.

The Enchanted Xeriscape
Different areas of landscape use can create a water-efficient landscape that is both beautiful and functional. Based upon your local climate (see the New Mexico Climate Areas map below) and the water-use zones you’d like to create in your landscape plan, you’ll need to select the appropriate plants. Use these three regional lists as a starting point.

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State Engineer Office Water Conservation Program
FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT WATER CONSERVATION, CALL 1-800-WATER-NM (1-800-928-3766)