Welcome to Xeriscaping!

Xeriscaping is the fine art of creating water-efficient landscapes by using plants that are appropriate to the natural environment. The term xeriscaping is derived from the Greek word, xeros, which means dry. And dry is a pretty good way to describe the natural landscapes of New Mexico—no matter where in the state you live.

But xeriscaping isn’t dry and dull. Well-designed xeriscapes are enchanting and beautiful. The best xeriscapes use a fraction of the water needed by traditional lawn-dominated landscapes. (Some xeric plants require little or no supplemental watering once they are established.) And xeriscapes require far less ongoing maintenance.

Xeriscaping with-wise plants makes sense in New Mexico. This brochure gives you step-by-step information that will help you convert your old, water-thirsty landscape into an attractive water-wise xeriscape.

How Much Does It Cost?

If you hire a landscape designer and start from scratch, installing a xeriscape is not much more expensive than a high-water-use landscape. Paying a professional to install your landscaping may cost from $1.00 to $4.00 a square foot or more, depending upon the complexity of your job. Of course, once you’ve got your landscape plan you can save 50% or more of the cost by doing the installation yourself. You might choose to have the irrigation system professionally installed and then install the plants yourself.

Plan on paying a professional $0.60 or more per square foot to convert the existing watering system to suit the new landscape needs and evaluating your site. Then complete your xeriscaping or hire a professional, you have the option of converting your landscape all at once or in stages. Here’s one way to convert your xeriscaping:

Consider a Three-Year Plan

ZONE

One
YEAR
Two
YEAR
Three
YEAR

Before & After

Water Tips

Xeriscaping Is Not “Zeroscaping”

Once upon a time, some landscapers used lots of rocks and a few sparse plants to create low-water-use landscaping. This kind of landscaping is now called “zeroscaping.” It is not the same as xeriscaping.

Genuine xeriscapes are lush and beautiful. Xeriscapes use a wide variety of native and other water-efficient plants to create color, interest and an oasis-like feeling.

Because it uses so much rock and so few of the same plants, zeroscaping tends to be hot and boring.

Xeriscaping is the natural and water-wise way to beautify New Mexico. Accept no substitutes!
Consider a Three-Year Conversion Plan

Whether you choose to do your own xeriscaping or hire a professional, you have the option of converting your landscape all at once or in stages. Here’s one way to convert your landscape using a three-year timeline:

Start by listing your needs and evaluating your site. Then complete your design. Begin making the structural changes (angling the patio area, adding a shade structure, etc.) If you’re anxious to start planting, select an area away from the house that can be converted in an empty zone. If necessary, cap the nearby sprinkler heads and modify the existing watering system to suit the new plantings. Begin removing plants that don’t fit into your new plan, including difficult-to-control perennial weeds, such as bindweed, and Bermuda grass.

Now it’s time to introduce the new design elements into your xeriscaped yard. Reduce your turf area (if that’s part of your plan). Finish converting your irrigation system by capping sprinkler heads or converting them to multi-emitter Hydrants. Add your new xeric plants. You may also want to plant some annuals this year to fill in the empty spaces until your perennials and xeric shrubs grow in.

Your xeric plants are now becoming established, so you should be able to cut back on the supplemental water. Finish planting, they concentrate on maintenance. Remove competitive plants and weeds. Make sure there’s at least a three- to four-inch-thick layer of mulch around your plants and trees. Check the irrigation system periodically and repair any leaks or breaks. Enjoy your low-maintenance yard!

How Much Does It Cost?

Converting an existing lawn or coping with a new landscaping project can cost approximately $0.20 per square foot. (It’s advisable to consult a landscape expert or contractor for an accurate estimate.) Of course, once you’ve got your landscape plan you can save 50% or more of the cost by doing the installation yourself. You might choose to install a new irrigation system or hire a professional to do the installation. Ask your local irrigation contractor for an estimate. The average cost for installing drip irrigation is $0.60 per square foot or more per square foot. For do-it-yourselfers, drip irrigation is a matter of individually activating water to plant roots. As a result, drip systems reduce evaporation and water loss because they deliver water directly to plant roots. Drip irrigation systems are designed for ease of use. The lush, mini-oasis zone includes the highest-water-use plants and your lawn area. The shady north and east sides of your house are perfectly suited for this zone. This zone takes advantage of low- and moderate-water-use plants. Choose plants that need infrequent supplemental watering (once a week or less).

Welcome to New Mexico’s Climate Zones

As you consider converting your landscape to water-saving xeriscaping, it’s helpful to understand New Mexico’s climate zones and specific plants recommended for your area. This zone can also serve as a guide to how much water your plants need and how often they should be watered.

Water Zones: Easy As 1-2-3

Zone 1: Arid

This zone has the least rainfall and is the driest zone in New Mexico. The basic difference between this zone and the others is the amount of water plants need and how often they should be watered.

Zone 2: Transition

The transition zone is used to blend lush areas with the dryer parts of a landscape. This zone takes advantage of low- and moderate-water-use plants.

Zone 3: Mini-Oasis

This zone has the highest water-use plants and your lawn area. The shady north and east sides of your house are perfectly suited for this zone.

Water Tips

The Basics of Drip Irrigation

Drip irrigation is the perfect method for watering most shrubs, perennials, and trees. Drip irrigation systems save water because they deliver slow, steady amounts of water directly to plant roots. As a result, drip systems cut down on evaporation, runoff, and overspray.

Drip systems can be professionally installed by landscape contractors. For do-it-yourselfers, drip irrigation kits are available at hardware stores, home centers and nurseries.

New Plants Need More Water

Even the most drought-resistant native plants need supplemental water during the first year or two to get established. Once established, reduce supplemental watering or eliminate it altogether (depending upon the plant). Follow instructions from a plant nursery and/or check each plant for clues to the amount of water it needs.

How Much Mulch?

One cubic yard of mulch will cover 100 square feet of landscape to a depth of three to four inches. Shredded bark and crushed rock are two of the most popular types of mulch, and both are readily available at garden center stores or through landscape contractors.
HARDY PERENNIALS SUCH AS GAILLARDIA (SOMETIMES KNOWN AS INDIAN BLANKET FLOWER) CAN ADD COLOR TO YOUR LANDSCAPE YEAR AFTER YEAR.

**STEP ONE:**
Make a Wish List
Before you get a shovel, before you purchase a single plant, before you call a local landscaper for assistance, you need to ask yourself a few questions about the kind of yard you want to create.

What’s Your Primary Focus?
Is water conservation, low maintenance or a wildlife-friendly habitat your primary goal? Is having an aesthetically beautiful yard that’s the envy of the neighbors at the top of your wish list? All of these are important considerations and will influence the design of your landscape.

How Will the Landscape Be Used?
If you need an active recreation area where the kids can play, a small turf may be in order. If what you really want is an “outdoor living room” where you can lounge in a hammock and enjoy the views, consider expanding your patio area with additional shade structures and adding low-water-use trees and shrubs to provide privacy.

What Do Your Favorite Landscapes Look Like?
Xeriscape styles can range from the formal look of an English country garden to the native look of a naturally occurring New Mexican landscape. What “look” are you most comfortable with? Your landscape should reveal your personality while reflecting the regional ecology. Pay close attention to your favorite landscapes so you can re-create some of their best features in your yard.

Is Privacy Important to You?
Landscaping can do a marvelous job of shielding your property from the next-door neighbor. Conversely, there may be views you want to enhance. Knowing the mature size of the plants and trees you ultimately select will ensure that you get the views or privacy you desire.

**STEP TWO:**
Take Inventory
The physical characteristics of the site should be considered. Every property has its own “micro-climates” which will affect design and plant choices. For example, the sunny east and south sides of a house typically have warm micro-climates and are well suited for and, drought-tolerant plants. The cooler north and east sides offer better climates for oasis zones. (For more information, see the “Water Zones: Easy As 1-2-3.” section.)

As you conduct a walk-through inspection of the site, pay particular attention to the existing plants. Are there some plants which are in decline and should be removed? Are there some plants that you absolutely want to keep? Established plants that will remain in the landscape will influence the water zoning of your new design.

Downsize Your Lawn
Instead of using turf grass to cover large areas of ground, choose your lawn size to fit your family’s needs. Consider drought-tolerant grasses such as buffalograss and blue grass, or water-wise groundcovers and shrubs.

Also examine your existing irrigation system. Note the location of your sprinkler heads. Can any parts of the present system be converted for your new xeriscape? Using existing irrigation for your new “mini-oasis” zones can make the conversion to xeriscape easier and less expensive. (Keep in mind that it’s best to have your lawn on one irrigation system valve and your trees, shrubs and flowers on another.)

This is also a good time to walk around the neighborhood and visit local garden stores to identify the plants you’d like to have in your new landscape. There are also many high-quality books about southwestern plants and design which you can use as resources.

**STEP THREE:**
Make a Plan
Now that you’ve done your “homework,” it’s time to sit down and design your new landscape.

You can create your own landscape plan or you can call upon a professional designer or landscaper for assistance. Either way, you must incorporate your needs and wants from Step 1 and the physical characteristics from Step 2 into an overall landscape design.

Your design will consist of the hard-scape (paving and walkways), the architectural features (such as shade structures and walls), the irrigation system and the plants you want.

Hardscapes and Architectural Features
If you plan to make major renovations to your landscape that involve construction of shade structures, new patios areas and/or new walkways, you might want to hire a professional landscaper. If you’re going to do it yourself, look for ideas and instructions in garden design books. The sales staff at local home center stores can also be helpful in deciding what materials you’ll need and how to get the job done.

Irrigation System
Your new irrigation system should be designed to incorporate your xeriscape plant’s water zones. For efficient use of water, turf and other high-water-use areas must be irrigated separately from native and xeric plants. Turf lawns are best watered by sprinklers or subsurface irrigation. Trees, shrubs, flowers and groundcovers can be watered efficiently with low-volume drip emitters, sprayers and bubblers.

As you convert your landscape to xeriscape, modify or replace your irrigation system as needed. Make sure plants with similar watering needs and rooting depths are watered by the same irrigation valve. And always place your lawn on a separate valve from other plantings.

In some cases, conventional lawn spray-heads may be converted to drip systems with multiple outlet adapters for drip emitters. (Because drip systems require less than 30 pounds per square inch of water pressure, a pressure-reducing valve will be needed to protect the system.) Jakes hoses and micro-sprayers are other irrigation options.

Set up your drip system so that it drains properly to prevent flooding. Make sure that it can be cleaned or flushed out to prevent clogging. Your irrigation system must also meet code regulations and should have backflow preventers to protect your family’s safety.

Remember, you should not mix bubblers, drip emitters and lawn sprinklers on the same automatic or manual system. Irrigation companies, garden stores or other professionals can provide valuable advice.

**STEP FOUR:**
Install Your Xeriscape
Hardscape, Irrigation and Plants
Now that all the planning is done, it’s time to get to work! Start with the big jobs first. A good rule of thumbs: construction first, then irrigation system, then planting.

Before you begin any construction projects yourself (such as creating walkways or grading the soil), seriously weight the advantages of getting professional assistance. Hiring a pro can make the job go much faster (but it will also be more expensive).

You may want to consult with an irrigation professional for advice on a new watering system to ensure that your trees, shrubs, plants and grasses receive the appropriate amounts of water.

Using your landscape plan, examine the property again for ways to use concrete and sod toppers to direct rainwater to plants. You can also direct water to planting areas by creating berms (hills) and swales (depressions).

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**STEP FIVE:**
Maintain and Enjoy!
Even though successful xeriscape are low maintenance, they aren’t completely maintenance free. To ensure that your xeriscape stay beautiful and water-wise, you’d need to periodically fertilize, prune, weed, mow and control pests.

To ensure continued water savings and to maintain an effective water barrier, keep a three-to-four-inch-thick layer of mulch around your plants. Remember that even the best-designed irrigation system must be maintained to retain its optimum efficiency. Check regularly for broken sprinkler heads, leaks, clogged drip emitters or lines, and blocked sprinkler heads. Make needed repairs or modifications immediately.

Now that the hard work is over, you’ll have more time to enjoy your new xeriscape!