

Xeri-ously Green

Growing in popularity, water-conserving landscape design is recommended as a smart boost for your yard and the environment.

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Living "green" is fast becoming more than a trend; it's becoming a way of life.

Homeowners are incorporating eco-friendly practices into their household routines and altering their lifestyles in the name of conservation. This mindset also applies to outside the home, as people take heed to the same old tips we hear from local officials every summer, such as "water your lawn in the early morning or late evening to reduce evaporation."

While that is important, homeowners can take outdoor water efficiency to the next level by xeriscaping their yard, a water-conserving landscape design method that's quickly gaining popularity.

With the dreaded "dog days of summer" here, water conservation is more important than ever. Incorporating xeriscape techniques into your lawn, however, can help you save water year-round. The core principle of xeriscaping is the use of drought-tolerant, native plants that don't require frequent watering.

"Anything that helps the environment nowadays is trend, and a good one," said local landscape designer **Susan Schlenger** of Susan Schlenger Landscape Design.

When drought-tolerant landscape design comes to mind, many might imagine lots of rocks and gravel and a grass-less yard. Not so, however. Low-water plants are also attractive.

Schlenger said the Zelkova, Ginkgo and the red-berried American holly trees are good choices for a xeriscaped lawn.



Courtesy of Susan Schlenger

This xeriscape is bordered with purple perennials, which take well to drier conditions and less watering.

"The Ginkgo has a beautiful shape of leaf," Schlenger said. "If you wanted a big, beautiful shade tree, you could use a Zelkova; that's reminiscent of the elm tree. It's almost weeping-looking and it gets very pretty fall color."

Also, planting plenty of shade trees "will keep the temperature a little cooler and help with the reduction of water," Schlenger added.

For shrubs, she suggests the ornamental Burning Bush and *Viburnum carlesii*. "That's a shrub that gets white flowers on it and they are fragrant," she said.

There are also varieties of low-water perennials available that "give you the color you are looking for...And they will do very well if you kind of ignore them for a while," Schlenger said. Examples are lavender and Walker's Low catmint. "I have that one in my garden, and in the heat of the summer, I have given it very little water and it's flourishing," she said.

Autumn Joy sedum is another that doesn't require a lot of water. "The catmint will give you color on and off all season with purple flowers and the sedum will give you end of summer to fall colors," she said.

Other xeriscape-friendly plants include the Yucca, Portulaca and Thyme.

An important part of a xeriscape is proper mulching, which helps retain soil moisture. "I like to use three inches of mulch. That helps conserve whatever water you are giving to your plants," Schlenger said.

Watering at the base of the plant rather than the leaves will also help minimize wasted water. This can be accomplished by installing a drip irrigation system, for example, as opposed to oscillating sprinklers. Drip irrigation works well because water trickles directly on the root zone and not into the air where it will evaporate more quickly.

Overall, implementing xeriscape design techniques into the design of your lawn benefits more than the environment. "It's good for the homeowner because they spend less time on watering," Schlenger said.

"It's also good if there is a really hot spell," she added, because if you aren't diligent about watering, "those plants that need a lot of water are going to suffer. But if you have plants that don't require a lot of water, they are going to do fairly well."

For more ideas, check out the "Xeriscape Handbook: A How-To Guide to Natural, Resource-Wise Gardening" by Gayle Weinstein or consult with a local landscape designer or landscape architect.