

Xeriscaping doesn't have to mean "Zeroscaping"

By Luis Llenza

Xeriscaping is a method of gardening that employs basic principles to conserve water while producing dramatic natural landscapes. First coined by the Denver Water Department, xeriscape comes from the Greek word xeros, meaning dry. The approaching rainy season is an ideal time to get started as new plantings require more irrigation until established.

Planning and Design - Consider the climatic conditions of the site and define how you intend to use your landscape. Will you cook or dine outdoors, have a pool or plant a vegetable garden?

Soil Analysis - Soils will vary, even within a given site.

Most garden shops carry soil analysis kits or for a small fee, you can send a soil sample to the University of Florida for analysis. Learn the acid/alkaline state and nutrient content, then improve your soil as needed.

Plant Selection - Group together plants with similar water needs. Select plants from species that are native or naturalized to our area. Have fun learning about these plants by becoming a member of Florida Native Plant Society or visit Miami's Fairchild Tropical Gardens.

Practical Turf Areas - Grass often covers more of the landscape than is needed for entertaining or recreation. Reduce the areas of water-guzzling lawn grass by substituting ground covers, shrubs, trees and flowering plants. Decks and patios can create outdoor living areas while mulched planting beds, pavers, cap-rocks and stepping stone paths replace areas of thirsty turf. The result will be a more interesting and manageable landscape.

Efficient Irrigation - Once plants are established, water infrequently, but deeply. Light watering results in shallow roots, leading to stress. Deep, more tolerant root systems develop from a once- or twice-weekly thorough, about 1/2' to 3/4'-inch, watering. Irrigate in the coolest part of the day, usually early morning, to avoid evaporation loss and wind drift.

Use of Mulches - Mulch retains moisture, controls soil temperature, discourages weeds and prevents erosion. A three- to four-inch layer of organic mulch should cover all exposed soil areas. I prefer cypress mulch, but pine bark and eucalyptus chips also work well. Water thoroughly before and after spreading mulch. Replenish twice a year.

Maintenance - Keep plants healthy with regular pruning and fertilizing with a 14-14-14 time-release fertilizer. For optimal effectiveness, check irrigation equipment frequently.

By following these xeriscape principles, you'll conserve up to 50 percent of current water usage while creating a garden that thrives in the Florida climate.