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After 25 years of Xeriscape, beautiful, water-efficient, sustainable landscapes come in a variety of packages

# The changing look of Xeriscape

By Nancy Eastman

Contemporary Xeriscape integrates beauty, conservation and low maintenance in harmony with the environment.

Xeriscape has achieved respectability. Twenty-five years ago when the term was introduced, the concept was to educate the public about proper landscape techniques and water conservation. Today it has become mainstream for both residential and commercial landscaping. Several factors have driven this change: the availability and cost of water, development of a greater variety of plants, new hardscape materials and innovative design.

The new generation of Xeriscape design integrates beauty, conservation and low maintenance in harmony with the regional environment. Landscape designers are expressing more sensitivity to local micro-climates and the different needs of Xeric plants. Years ago people thought Xeriscape meant gravel, rocks and cacti. Today, we in the industry and our informed consumers expect Xeriscape to be as attractive as it is water-wise.

## Geared to conservation

Water-conscious communities and forward-thinking developers require landscapes that use less water, expand visual interest and create inviting neighborhoods. Less and more costly water has also driven irrigation technology to become more efficient, thanks to subsurface irrigation and cutting-edge, smart controllers for watering microzones. Pop-up spray heads with pressure regulators and built-in check valves increasingly minimize water waste. Water audits help contractors design or retrofit irrigation systems for efficient water use. Take a look around Colorado at the more recently built landscapes, and it's obvious the driving force is to save water. The need to conserve is drastic, and it shows.

## More to see in and around plants

In the early days of Xeriscape we valued plants for their natural look and function—they were practical for saving water, and that's why we selected them. Now Xeric plants are being used and appreciated for their color, form and sculptural qualities. Designers are using more varieties of grasses to combine textures, movement and structure for distinctive fall and winter interest. We are also emphasizing native Xeric shrubs and trees for their hardiness, wind protection and naturalism.

Initially, "Xeric" was also synonymous with "native," which meant limited plant options. Nursery owners say that more than 50 percent of what is sold in nurseries today was not seen or available 25 years ago. Steadily adopting plants from similar growing conditions in other parts of the world has widened the selection of perennials, groundcovers and succulents. More than ever, Xeric plants are versatile—they can flourish in microclimates and rock gardens, near water features and around dry streambeds.

Regional growers have developed more offerings and have given consumers a quick way to recognize and group low-water plants by their specific water requirements, thanks to Garden Centers of Colorado's X-rated plants program. Through the plant trials at Colorado State University, we understand more about the specific requirements of individual plants for their care and water use, including use in dry shade. That knowledge makes for more durable Xeriscapes.

The updated look of Xeriscape incorporates elements that work with the plants to enhance the look and feel of the landscape. Trellises, containers, sculpture and artistic

fences draw attention to plants by creating focal points or backdrops. Hardscape has become more grand and sculptural. New materials offer more sophisticated choices in colors, textures, sizes and shapes. Structural elements of walls, walkways, stepping stones, specimen boulders, bridges, benches and sculpture are being integrated for stunning effects within Xeric designs.

## **Design**

Today's innovative Xeriscape designs highlight the subtler beauties of nature and connect us to the natural, Western environment. They offer a rich alternative to turfgrass and juniper monocultures. Instead of just planting Xeric beds, we are designing and installing entire Xeric landscapes that are colorful and lush year-round. When that is not possible, traditional landscapes are being retrofitted in small ways-to optimize water use and maintenance.

The use of strong shapes with land forms and planting beds gives a grander scale and focus to Xeric plantings than we saw 25 years ago. Built rock outcroppings are combined with natural washes and drainage within dry

streambeds. Improved designs and materials for water delivery and control make plantings in and around water features and ponds water-wise.

Xeriscape designs also reflect a maturing environmental awareness within the industry. Water-wise environments provide havens for wildlife, birds and important insects, and provide a platform from which to observe migratory patterns. The updated Xeriscape lends itself to creating different moods—stark minimalism, romantic Mediterranean, serene prairie or rugged montane.

Landscaping that is ill-suited to our natural environments wastes precious water, destroys the land and starves our souls. As Xeriscape has become more sophisticated and refined, it now connects us more than ever with nature and softens our urban sprawl.

*—Nancy Eastman, owner of On the Prairie, in Lakewood, has won numerous Excellence in Landscape awards for her Xeric landscapes.*