

# Waterless Features Have Deep Appeal

*By Nancy Eastman and Lynn Ridenour*

As the drought deepens in Colorado, searching for alternatives to the use of water in landscape design becomes more imperative. Much has been written about the art of dry landscaping that includes use of water wise plants, lots of mulch and very little if any bluegrass lawn.

Dryscaping as a concept needs to be extended to areas that before now seemed impossible to separate from the presence of water. Dry water features without the water seem impossible to imagine. But yet there is a history of such creations from the Japanese whose landscape art is the most skillful at creating the art of illusion.

Japanese art is, among other things, about the creation of art objects that are made to look like something else—the bonsai made to look as though it were a full-sized tree or the garden composed of rocks and gravel made to appear as though it were a stream.

These ponds, streams or rivers of stone and gravel are carefully crafted to offer multiple angles from which they can be viewed. All these features contain a keen appreciation of craftsmanship in their rockwork.

The idea of waterless features can be carried over from the Japanese culture to one Western in concept, fitting with the bigger spaces and scale of most landscapes in this country. And, the concept has a heightened appeal as we enter yet another year of diminishing water.

The key to a successful dry feature is craftsmanship of the stonework. The water feature with its ‘pools and waterfalls’ should look as though it were a mountain stream, dry at the moment, which may occasionally have water flowing over its surface but which functions visually quite well without it.

These streambeds are other than functional drainage ditches or swale liners where cobble is arranged to divert excess water away from the house.

Most water features rely on the play of water over the surface of stone without much thought to the arrangement of the rocks themselves. What ends up in many cases is a big pile of carelessly ‘arranged’ boulders which hopefully will have some meaning once the switch is flipped and the water comes tumbling down.

And these waterless features may exist wholly without plantings as well. Plantings can be used to blend the feature in with an existing landscape, but effective rockwork can exist by itself.

The Genesee water feature demonstrates how the concept can be implemented in a rocky, subalpine location. The clients, out of concern that water would attract all sorts of wildlife, opted for creating a dry feature of boulders arranged down a steep slope on their property. At this site, there was little in the way of landscape beyond a flagstone patio, rock walls and some peripheral plantings among the existing natural boulders. These boulders were huge massive outcroppings that dominated the land. These outcroppings and the steep slope of the site played an important role in the final design solution. The ‘water’ feature and dry streambed descended through these natural rock formations providing the final design with a sense of belonging in the existing landscape.

The design revolved around creating a more elaborate flagstone terrace and granite water feature that included pools and a streambed extending from the foundations of the house outwards down the slope for 20 to 30 feet and 10 to 15 feet wide. Downspout drainage was diverted into the water feature to avoid erosion and give the feature a natural source of water. Skillful execution of rockwork by scale, texture and color conveyed the idea of natural pools and streams—the whole having the illusion of having not been constructed at all, but as though it had been there forever.

Stairs, walkways and platforms integrate the design further by offering different views of the landscape.

Plantings designed for the project were wildlife and drought resistant. An irrigation system was installed, but the current drought forestalled the planting of any of the shrubs and perennials indicated in the design until the current water shortage abates.

A dry water feature depends upon artistic skilful rockwork for its success. And, for this Genesee residence, the creation of a sculptural feature built solely of rock provided a successful resolution to a number of considerations both functional and aesthetic.