



By Nancy Eastman

**XERISCAPE HAS HAD A BAD RAP.** It's been mispronounced and misunderstood. Now that the Colorado born and bred concept is celebrating 25 years in 2006 and has been widely adopted throughout North America, it's time to set the record straight.

Xeriscape is not ZEROSCAPE as it is commonly mispronounced. Xeris is Greek for dry and in landscape lingo translates to low-water landscaping. Xeriscape is also not the absence of grass, trees, shrubs or flowers. It is definitely not a yard full of rock. That you can call "Zeroscape."

As Colorado has had to come to terms with drought its municipalities and developers have been forced to become more water conscious than ever. Now, conservation minded communities and forward-thinking developers are applying low-water landscape designs to build landscapes that use less water, expand visual interest and create inviting neighborhoods. Take a look at the more recently built landscapes around Colorado and it's obvious the driving force is to save water. The YARDX study, involving residential landscapes and conducted from 1997 to 2002, covered seven municipalities from Fort Collins to Colorado Springs. The study demonstrated that consumers could realize water savings ranging from 18 to more than 50 percent with properly designed, installed and maintained Xeriscapes.

### **More to see in plants**

In the early days of xeriscape, we saw the designated *low-water plants* more in terms of their natural look and function—they were practical for saving water and that's why they were selected. Now xeric plants are being used and appreciated in their own right—for their color, form and sculptural qualities. For example, landscape designers are using more varieties of grasses to combine textures, movement and structure.

Because consumers and designers alike desired more visual qualities in their xeric plants, the selection had to expand to fit a variety of needs including hardiness, wind protection and naturalism. More xeric trees and shrubs are being grown and sold to meet these needs. In addition, plants from similar growing conditions from around the world are being imported to give more variety to our plant palette, including perennials, groundcovers and succulents.

Regional growers affiliated with the Garden Centers of Colorado through their *X-rated Plants* program have not only expanded the assortment of xeric plants but given us as consumers a quick "flag" to recognize and select low-water plants. By identifying plants as X, XX or XXX, we have a ready-made system for grouping plants together based on how much water they need every week.



## More to see around plants

The updated look of xeriscape also incorporates elements that work with the plants to enhance plantings and the feel of the entire landscape. Trellises, containers, sculpture and artistic fences either draw attention to the plants by creating focal points or they serve as a backdrop to showcase the plantings. The use of containers, for example, adds variety through the color, texture and structure of both pots and plants.

The addition of what landscape designers and installers call “hardscape,” also showcases low-water plants while it uses up space that does not have to be planted—or watered. Incorporating structural, hardscape elements like walls, walkways, stepping stones, boulders, flagstone terraces, bridges, benches and sculpture offers sophistication to xeric designs that we didn’t see 25 years ago. Plus, new hardscape materials offer more colors, texture, sizes and shapes to these landscape components than ever before.

After 25 years Xeriscape is now more diverse and more interesting when we look at it. While we stand and admire its lush and variegated appearance, we may not even think “That’s a xeriscape.” We just like what we see.

## Award worthy.

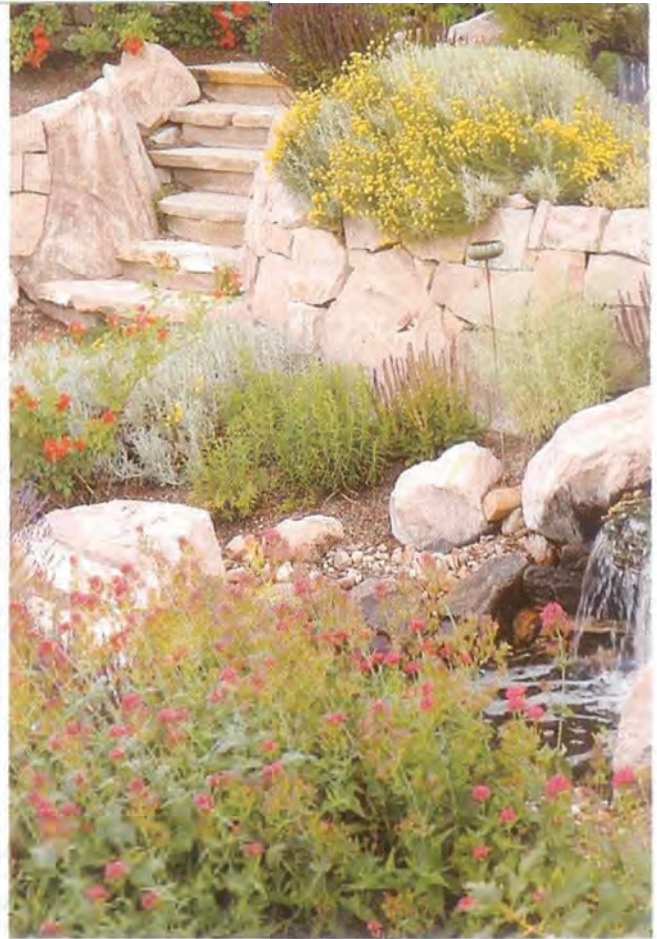
Xeriscapes are in fact so stunning that the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado (ALCC) has included xeriscape properties as an award category in its annual Excellence in Landscape Awards program for many years. The award-winning properties shown in this article demonstrate that xeriscape is truly a far cry from zeroscape.

## What has stayed the same

When the term xeriscape was first coined, it was a means to promote a common sense approach to landscaping in the semi-arid west. The Seven Principles of Xeriscape (see sidebar) are the timeless, rule-of-thumb steps to creating an attractive and durable landscape by doing it right the first time in order to save water over the long haul. Landscape contractors and homeowners who have made that commitment to conserve water in their landscapes will tell you it’s worth the effort in both water and dollar savings and in personal satisfaction.

Nancy Eastman is a member of the Associated Landscape contractors of Colorado. The Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado, with more than 700 member firms statewide, is the only professional trade association for the landscape contracting industry in Colorado. To find a professional landscape contractor specializing in Xeriscape or to learn more about water conservation, visit [www.alcc.com](http://www.alcc.com).

Photo courtesy Landscape Associates, Inc. /2005 ALCC Excellence in Landscape Awards.



## 7 PRINCIPLES OF XERISCAPE

- 1) Plan and design landscaping comprehensively.
- 2) Evaluate the soil and improve as needed with soil amendments.
- 3) Create practical turf areas.
- 4) Use appropriate plants and group them according to like water needs.
- 5) Water efficiently with a properly designed irrigation system.
- 6) Use organic mulches to reduce surface evaporation of water.
- 7) Practice appropriate landscape maintenance.