



Fill Your Landscape with Color

A maintenance free landscape full of color, fragrance, interesting textures, coveted shade and water-efficient plants that attract hummingbirds and butterflies – that's my idea of a perfect yard. Sound impossible? It's not!

You can have this type of landscape merely by using effective design techniques and plants that like growing here in our salty soils and challenging climate. Simply called Xeriscape (zer-i-scape) this type of landscaping uses water wise plants and can even include small water features, patios, walkways, limited turf areas and effective mulches combined into an eye-appealing environment.

Xeriscape should not look like a sea of gravel or barren rocks and cactus. Xeric gardens can be full of beautiful green plants that are water-efficient and able to withstand periods of drought. They are compatible with the environment of our Sonoran Desert which has hot dry summers and cool moist winters.

Here are some answers to common misconceptions and questions about Xeriscape.

I have an established landscape that I enjoy. Can I still use Xeriscape?

Yes. You can make sure your irrigation system is operating correctly, that leaks are promptly repaired, and that the amount of water delivered during irrigation is consistent with seasonal needs. Avoid excessive pruning, use proper mowing techniques and apply mulch to conserve water in your Xeriscape. Grass is a good choice where children play but if the only time you walk on your lawn is when you mow it, you may not need it. It could be time to consider a conversion for such areas.

I have heard that only certain plants can be used in Xeriscape and that I shouldn't plant gardenias. Is this true?

Not exactly. Some non-native plants will work in a Xeriscape as long as you provide the right environment or microclimate. Be sure to consider the characteristics of the location where you intend to place the plant. If you want to plant gardenias for example, select a location that offers some shade such as in an entryway or near a patio, where the soil remains moist for a longer time and humidity levels are slightly higher. Keep plants with higher water needs together in focal areas and use them on a limited basis. Remember that plants that aren't desert-adapted may not survive here, no matter how hard you try.

I want to use native plants in my landscape. How do they work with Xeriscape?

Native plants that grow in our area are great choices because they are acclimated to the environment. Varieties that need very little water once established are good selections for the perimeter areas of the landscape. Consider the cultural characteristics of each plant when selecting a location. Plants that need good drainage will struggle in our heavy clay soils.

I've heard that using mulches can be beneficial. What kinds of mulches are available?

Mulches help to reduce evaporation from the soil and insulate tender roots from our temperature extremes. As they decompose, organic mulches release nutrients back into the soil and provide a home for beneficials, like earthworms. Nurseries and landscape material suppliers sell mulch in bags or in bulk. Many homeowners compost their yard waste which provides a good source of mulch and reduces green waste sent to the landfill. Although not as beneficial to the landscape as organic mulches, inorganics such as granite and stone are another option.

I want to set my automatic irrigation timer. How do I know how often to water the lawn?

Lawns perform best when they receive regular but deep watering allowing the moisture to soak in to at least 6 – 10 inches. In hot, dry weather they will need ½ to ¾ inches of water applied

once every three days. Even a winter lawn only requires water once a week after the seed has germinated and is growing. Your lawn will 'tell' you when it needs water. If the grass doesn't spring back after you walk on it, it's time to irrigate. Check with a probe to be sure. Visit our website for landscape watering guidelines at www.ci.gilbert.az.us/water/guidelines.cfm

I'm confused about how often to mow my grass and how high to set the blade.

How tall you mow your grass will depend on what type of grass you have. The most common turf grass for homeowners here is hybrid Bermuda, and there are several varieties. Dwarf hybrids like Tifway and Tifgreen can be mowed at a height of ½". Midiron or E-Z Turf should be cut to a height of ¾" - 1", while common Bermuda and Bob Sod can be cut to a height of about 1 ½". Winter rye grass should be maintained at a height of 1 ½ – 2" tall. A rule of thumb is to never remove more than 1/3 of the grass blade. This will avoid scalping the lawn which can affect its health and water demands. If you mow frequently you shouldn't need to bag your clippings. Tips for a healthy lawn can be found at www.ci.gilbert.az.us/water/healthylawn.cfm

I like the idea of saving water in my landscape: however, I live in a community with deed restrictions that specify how much grass and what type of plants I can use. What should I do?

Local restrictions may limit your flexibility in selecting plants for a creative design. However, the principles of Xeriscaping can be incorporated into planning, designing and maintaining your landscape. A well planned Xeriscape offers low maintenance, lower water bills and an attractive colorful, lush landscape. Plants with higher water needs can be grouped together in limited areas. Small sections of intensely managed and irrigated plantings can be used for accent. Pockets of bright color can make a more powerful impact than rambling shrubs or turf.

You may consider working with your community to amend the existing requirements to allow for creativity, efficiency and conservation of resources. Your local water conservation office can provide more information. Staff is available to speak to homeowner groups about creating water efficient landscapes without sacrificing color and beauty. Look for the free booklet, ***Landscape Plants for the Arizona Desert*** available from your city water conservation office. Gilbert residents can call 480-503-6098 or visit www.ci.gilbert.az.us/water to order on-line.

My leisure time is valuable to me and I'd rather not spend it doing yard work. I've been told that Xeriscapes require less maintenance. Is this true?

Xeriscapes require a lot less maintenance than traditional landscapes, but no landscape is maintenance free. Placing the right plant in the right space where it can grow to its mature size without crowding neighboring plants or structures will reduce frequent maintenance. By only watering plants when they actually need it, they won't become overgrown. Many desert-adapted plants never need fertilizer, and others require nutrients only occasionally. Desert-adapted plants are so well suited for our environment they are seldom affected by insects or diseases. You will rarely need to use pesticides. Occasional maintenance, such as mowing, annual pruning and periodically checking the irrigation system are important to the health of any landscape.

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Be sure to visit the Town of Gilbert Water Conservation web pages for free landscape workshops, landscaping tips, water audits, frequently asked questions and more.

<http://www.ci.gilbert.az.us/water>



Water Conservation

GILBERT



Canary Island Sage



Chaparral Sage



Blue Euphorbia



Baja Red Fairy Duster



Maximilian Sunflower



Pink Rain Lily



Orange Bells



Desert Willow



Mexican Honeysuckle

More details on these plants can be found in *Landscape Plants for the Arizona Desert*.