



Xeriscape Is Healthy; Zeroscape Is Not!

by Marilyn Loser

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I hear people say “zeroscaping”; I hope they mean “xeriscaping.” Xeriscaping is water-efficient landscaping – it doesn’t mean rocks and a single cactus. It can mean beautiful yards with flowers, greenery, and shade. In addition, it can mean reasonably low maintenance and water needs.

“Xeriscape” comes from the Greek “xeros” meaning dry, and “scape” meaning landscape. So, the word coined by Denver Water Department employees in 1981, means a type of landscape where plants don’t require a lot of water.

The world’s first Xeriscape Demonstration Garden was created at the Denver Botanic Gardens in 1986. It has been renamed to Dryland Mesa.

We don’t have a lot of American words that begin with ‘x’. When saying xeriscape, think Xerox – yep, starts with an ‘x’, but is pronounced like a ‘z’. I think the starting ‘zee’ sound is what confuses some people, prompting them to say zeroscape.

To me, zeroscaping means having no plants at all – only rocks, gravel, concrete, asphalt and/or wood chips. I don’t include dirt in the list since some weeds will grow in the dirt at least part of the year. Vince Urbina, one of my favorite Colorado foresters, says there is no such thing as zeroscaping -- there will be a weed or rebel plant growing somewhere on the scene.

There are some places in Alamosa that have gone toward zeroscaping. I understand the desire to have no yard upkeep, but it makes the property ugly. Careful planning and planting could transform these barren scapes into a welcoming environment.

My focus has been on trees, but I plan to intersperse “Alamosa Flowers” columns with “Alamosa Trees” this spring so you’ll hear more about Alamosa garden xeriscapes.

When many of the homes in the older parts of Alamosa were built, water was inexpensive (as was gasoline). People planted lush lawns and overwatering often spilled into the streets. Alamosa water rates have steadily increased, with a big increase happening this year. I fear people will just stop watering and our town will shrivel into ugliness. It doesn’t need to happen!

Xeriscaping has 7 principles for growing a water-efficient, drought-tolerant landscape or garden. I will use the example of my yard to reflect on each principle.

- 1) Group together plants with similar water needs: I have one area near my home that is protected from the wind and watered by sprinklers. Here I plant any plants NOT rated xeric.

I have outlying areas that are very xeric and receive infrequent supplemental water. Areas in between receive regular water and I plant more xeric plants further from water sources.

- 2) Keep lawns small: Rather than a huge lawn that requires lots of water, fertilizer, mowing, and other maintenance, we have a small lawn near the house. We can walk barefoot and do cartwheels with the grandkids. It gives the sense and cooling of a lawn without having a huge expanse. I use a hand mower. We have an ash tree in the lawn just west of the house that gets watered when the lawn does and provides welcome summer shade.
- 3) Use efficient irrigation systems: We have sprinklers on timers in the lawn area and low pressure drip or mini sprinkler irrigation systems on timers on most of the rest. For the outlying areas, I have drip systems that I only hook up every few weeks via a simple timer and hose. Local garden centers can help you with simple, easy to install systems – or you can install more elaborate systems.
- 4) Amend soils to increase their water-holding capacity: The term “amend” when referring to soil may seem odd. I have a friend who says, “You amend the constitution, not the soil.” Our yard, one the west side of town did not have good soil. I have brought in top soil and soil conditioner. I’ve made and purchased compost and dug it in on a regular basis.
- 5) Apply mulches to retain moisture. As I’ve mentioned in several articles, I place 3-4 inches of mulch around each of my trees and shrubs. I mostly use bark mulch and wine corks (yep, I learned this trick at the Columbia Crest Winery in Washington state.) In the fall, I top flower stalks, leaving a few inches, and lay the cuttings over the flower beds.
- 6) Use drought-tolerant and native plants: I mostly do and will go into this more in subsequent columns. Meanwhile, check out AlamosaTrees.net and AlamosaFlowers.net to get an idea of what works in Alamosa.
- 7) Stress regular maintenance: Any landscape requires maintenance. Sometimes I see people working as hard on a weed-filled yard as they would need to keep an enjoyable yard.

For specifics on applying xeriscaping techniques to Alamosa yards and gardens, read the next Alamosa Trees column.

"He that plants trees loves others beside himself." Thomas Fuller