



# Alamosa Landscapes

## Xeriscape Principles Revisited: Part 1

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As I've driven around Alamosa this summer, I've noticed that a lot of residential yards don't look very good. I realize many folks cut back on having lawns and/or gardens due to increases in water prices and lack of time to spend in the yard. I do believe it is a good time to revisit the elements of xeriscape systems.

Xeriscaping is water-efficient landscaping – it doesn't mean just 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.

Two main xeriscape concepts are 1) to be preventative, not reactive and 2) don't forget maintenance. Just strewing gravel over the front yard may look good for the first month or so. But we have a lot of weeds in Alamosa and if we have any rain the seeds will germinate and come up through the gravel. Xeriscaped yards, if well designed, usually don't require as much maintenance as other types of gardens, but they require regular maintenance. The more you're on top of maintenance, the less overall time yard care takes. I realize this is easier said than done! I try to maintain my yard and walk around frequently and remove weeds. However, my husband just reported a three-foot tall kochia lurking in shrubbery that I missed!

I've found a Landscape Colorado YouTube video from 2013 to be very helpful. Sadly, they no longer have a website, but an online search of the video should turn up the short, informative video. There are seven principles and I'll address them one at a time.

1. Good design and planning: It's very important to determine up front where you want plants and where you want hardscape (anything that isn't plant material such as stones, concrete sidewalks, and paving stones). One of the biggest mistakes I think Alamosans make when planning on using gravel and paving stones is to not include a layer of either plastic sheeting or landscaping fabric underneath. “Landscape fabric is a textile material used to control weeds by inhibiting their exposure to sunlight,” according to Wikipedia. “The fabric is normally placed around desirable plants,

covering areas where other growth is unwanted. The fabric itself can be made from synthetic or organic materials, sometimes from recycled sources.”

While it doesn't totally prevent weeds, it greatly cuts down on their growth. We use plastic sheeting under gravel in the vacated alley where we don't want anything to grow. I use more landscaping fabric now under gravel anywhere near trees and shrubs. Their roots expand out at least as far the diameter of the canopy and I want to capture any precipitation that I can.

Planning also involves considerations such as how much watering you plan to do and how to you plan to water. For a sustainable garden in Alamosa, you need to irrigate it in some way. For example, I know one lady who loves to hand water by hose so plans how much time she wants to spend and how far from her house she can effectively water with her hose. I, on the other hand, love automatic low pressure drip systems regulated by a timer. I check every few days to make sure they are working properly – sometimes an emitter gets clogged or an O-ring holding the lines comes loose.

2. Good soil preparation and amending the soil: Good soil that holds water gently and has nutrients is essential for a good garden. Once, a friend planted native plants on her property that was just outside of Alamosa. They didn't fare well. Her idea was that “native plants need native soils.” In theory, a good idea, but how many beautiful flowers do you see growing in the middle of summer on the flat outskirts of Alamosa? Most of the valley floor is sandy with areas of clay and very little organic matter. Compare this to lush mountain meadows that get more rain and have developed better soil due to the decay of plants and trees. I aim for loamy soil and I amend each year with compost and/or soil conditioner – both are available locally.

I'll continue xeriscape principles 3-7 in the next column. Our gardening season may be coming to an end, but it's never too early to plan for next year!

*"Every garden is a chore sometimes, but no real garden is nothing but a chore."*

Nancy Grasby