



Alamosa Landscapes

Xeriscape principles revisited: Part 2

by Marilyn Loser

2019 September 11

In the last column I discussed two of the seven basic principles of Xeriscape design – (1) good design and planning and (2) good soil preparation and amending the soil. The five others follow.

3. Appropriate use of turf grass: I love to walk bare foot on grass; but I don't need too much. Turf grass needs more water than garden beds with xeric plants. I have a bit, but not a mini golf course! I suggest placing grass where your family uses it. I'd give up on the large front lawns with no shade that are mostly noticed by people driving by going about their lives. I let the grass grow taller than I used to and it is healthier and doesn't require quite as much water since the sun doesn't dry out the soil so quickly.
4. Group plants by water needs: Our flower beds that are close to the house on the west side receive more water than outlying beds and are somewhat protected by a six-foot fence. I plant showier, taller, and plants requiring more water in this area. These include delphiniums (*Delphinium*), monk's hood (*Aconitum napellus*), white hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle'), queen of the meadow (*Filipendula vulgaris kahome*), trollius (or globe flower, *Trollius*), and bishop's weed (*Aegopodium variegatum*).

At the other end of the water spectrum are drought resistant flowers such as creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*), creeping veronica (*Veronica oltensis*), and baby's breath – creeping and regular (*Gypsophila repens 'alba'* and *Gypsophila paniculata*). And there are xeric shrubs including chamisa/rabbitbush (*Ericameria nauseosus*), fernbush (*Chamaebatiaria millefolium*), buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea*), Apache plume (*Fallugia paradoxa*) and three-leaf low sumac (*Rhus trilobata 'Autumn Amber'*). As I've mentioned before in previous columns, I'm planting more shrubs as I age – they take less care!

5. Efficient irrigation system: This is harder for some folks. I am fortunate to have three types that all work well and are on timers. The closer-in grass and gardens have traditional sprinklers along with a few low pressure emitters. Outlying gardens either have low pressure emitters using what I refer to as 'blue line' tubing (1/4-inch black tubing with a blue strip) or Netafim drip line with built-in emitters 12 inches apart.

When I first started gardening in the San Luis Valley I used low-cost black soaker hoses. The only problem was that after a few years the 'pores' clogged with dirt and stopped delivering water evenly.

6. Mulches to retain moisture: You may wonder “Why use mulch?” Two major reasons are to mitigate soil temperature (soil underneath doesn’t get as hot or cold as soil on the surface) and it deters the sprouting of unwanted plants (no access to light which many need to germinate). Most recommendations are for three to four inches of mulch. I use several kinds of mulch. In close-in areas I use wine corks (Yep! Learned this at a winery along the Columbia River where they mulched trees and decorative shrubs with corks), cedar bark mulch (it is shaggy so intertwines and is less likely to blow in our high winds), and small gravel. The gravel is on top of (a) landscape fabric around trees where we don’t want anything else to grow but want to water the trees out to the drip line or (b) black plastic in areas where we don’t want to let water meet the underlying soil such as in the vacated alley. All work well. Each year I refresh any areas where the bark has broken down.
7. Good maintenance: Often the most difficult for busy people! I see many yards that were originally nicely laid out and then left without regular maintenance. You can see them in most neighborhoods around town. What went wrong? Perhaps folks thought implementing their yard design was a onetime thing. That’s not the case. Any yard needs regular maintenance.

As I stated in the last column, even hardscape areas with gravel need regular maintenance. Even with underlying landscape fabric or plastic, over the years the wind blows in sand and seeds that love to sprout when we have any precipitation. It’s especially bad if you live downwind from land that has a lot of weeds. I frequently monitor the yard (who can’t use a bit more walking about?) and pull any seedlings that pop up. If you get them when young, it’s a lot easier!

I’ve loved the recent rain and early morning coolness with a hint of crisp fall air. Get out and enjoy!

"The only two herbicides we recommend are cultivation and mulching." Organic Gardening Magazine