

Almost without fail, I receive two primary requests from my landscape design clients: a low-maintenance landscape, and colour throughout the growing season.

Although certain site characteristics can create some challenges and limitations, satisfying both these requirements in a xeriscape design is certainly doable. Sometimes it includes 'thinking outside the box' somewhat, but gardeners wishing a water-conscious garden have already moved outside of convention.

The low-maintenance criterion comes naturally. Generally speaking, a landscape that requires less water also requires less care. The most obvious example of this is the lawn. Reducing the size of your lawn or replacing the water-hungry Kentucky bluegrass with a drought-tolerant seed blend decreases maintenance time almost immediately, especially if you change other lawn care habits such as fertilizing several times a year, applying herbicides and pesticides, etc.

In a xeriscape, gardeners are faced with weeding (as every gardener is!) but the proper use of mulch can reduce that ongoing chore significantly, especially if you're not battling crabgrass or bindweed. When choosing between organic or in-organic mulch consider the maintenance needs of each one as well as the benefits each provide.

In-organic mulches such as gravel or decorative rock do not need to be topped up every few years and might provide a 'cleaner' look initially. However, xeriscapes using a surfacing that is solely rock can look sterile and boring, never mind the heat that is generated in our hot, dry summers, putting stress on both vegetation and air conditioners.

Weeding maintenance can be more difficult with rock as well. It is important to use a landscape cloth under the rock but keep in mind this barrier helps, *but does not prevent* weed seed germination under the cloth. It is much harder to get the weed root out from under the landscape cloth. Rocks will also collect small soil particles and sand over time, providing an ideal germination bed for weed seeds.

Conversely organic mulches such as bark or compost with a bark component do need to be topped up every two or three years (depending on various factors). In my view, other benefits of organic mulch make up for this chore. It is like a protective blanket regulating soil temperature, reducing weed seed germination, retaining soil moisture and, as it breaks down, adds nutrients to the soil. Often, a mix of both organic and inorganic mulches looks best in a xeriscape.

Soil analysis and amendment, and effective irrigation (drip and/or micro irrigation) – two other principles of xeriscape gardening – also reduce the amount of maintenance.

Selecting the right plant for the right spot makes all the difference, of course. But many xeric plants prefer not to have spring fertilizing or fertile soil; in fact, some thrive in clay, rocky or nutrient-poor soil or in hot sites. These traits likely sound familiar to many Okanagan gardeners!

Shrub and tree pruning can also be limited in a xeriscape garden. Again, thought must be put into placing the plants in a suitable spot in the first place – or moving them before

they get too mature. The limited use of water automatically reduces maintenance related to pruning to control growth or staking to support floppy or leggy stems.

Certainly choosing colourful long-flowering perennials and ornamental grasses over annuals is another way dramatically reduce maintenance over the years.

The other requirement invariably requested of me – colour throughout the growing season – needs planning but can be accomplished by selecting a mix of plant types. Include a variety of plant heights, bloom colour and bloom time, as well as perennials that have interesting foliage colour or are evergreen.

To extend the enjoyment year-round, consider using evergreens, broadleaf evergreens, and ornamental grasses for interest during the winter months when other plantings are dormant. Not only do they provide substance form and movement, these plants can provide habitat and food for over-wintering birds and other wildlife.

Shrubs or trees with interesting branching, bark or bark colour contribute positively to your winter landscape.

The Plant Database at www.okanaganxeriscape.org is an excellent resource for low-water plant choices, both native and adapted species.

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