

One would hope the perception of a xeriscape is moving away from being a yard filled with rock: gravel, decorate shale, lava rock, drain rock ... there are so many alternatives to surrounding your immediate environment with a heat effect.

In terms of water conservation, rock certainly does not need to be watered. (I recommend starting with a clean product though, as the rain will settle pockets of soil in which weeds will inevitably grow.)

Besides the poor design taste and uninteresting 'moonscape' aspect of vast areas of non-vegetated rock products, there is another fact to take into consideration when overusing inorganic surfacing in the Okanagan.

Summers are hot and dry here ... usually(!) Rock products will either absorb or deflect the sun's rays, making it uncomfortable to walk on, or even be near. The radiant heat, particularly if rock is placed up near the house, can be unbearable and likely will have an impact on your electricity bill as the air conditioner struggles to keep the temperature down indoors.

Heat is also created by large swathes of asphalt or concrete.

Incorporating some type of vegetation into rock areas lessens this issue, but be sure to choose plants that can survive the extra heat.

Anywhere you use rock, be sure to use groundcloth – a good heavy-duty grade, **not** plastic – as an additional weed barrier. Having said that though, as a client wisely pointed out this morning, “weeds can come up through the narrowest of cracks in asphalt”.

Indeed.

And, at the risk of being boringly repetitive, a 'maintenance-free' or 'no maintenance' yard simply does not exist.

A xeriscape can become remarkably more interesting with the introduction of feature rocks - pieces that have a few outstanding features.

A feature rock may be particularly large, striated or colourful, or oddly shaped. It might 'match' the xeriscape or the house colour, or provide an eye-catching contrast.

Two tips on using feature rocks: they are not a feature (or specimen) if you overdo their use, and be sure to situate them in such a way that they actually complement the landscape, not stick out like a sore thumb.

As suggested in previous columns, mimicking local nature is a sure way to create a yard that looks like it 'belongs' and helps to keep the maintenance low. For example, if you want to create a rock garden on a slope, a dry creek bed, or a waterfall, look to nature to get ideas that work.

Other inanimate objects have their place in an appealing xeriscape as well. Items such as water-worn logs, functional statuary such as a birdbath, or old tubs or barrels are a few of the limitless examples.

Just be sure whatever you choose is both appropriate for your garden style and architecture of your house and is placed thoughtfully and appropriately, such as the log and cow skull shown in the photograph.

Some other examples of how Grasslands Nursery has incorporated feature rocks into a xeriscape include using a large, flat rock as a seating area for a young girl in her 'secret garden', setting stone at a driveway edge for a residence number, and, with vegetation, hiding a manmade item in a yard.

A word of caution here: there are guidelines on placement of plantings or other features near electrical boxes or fire hydrants, so check with local authorities before doing so. Also, you'll want to maintain visibility where your driveway intersects with a public roadway or sidewalk.

In summary, have fun with rock in your landscape and use your imagination and creativity. Look to nature or at other landscapes to determine what you like and why you like it. (Or, perhaps, why you don't!) "All things are good in moderation."

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