

Still Free

C O L O R A D O

# Gardener

*A Thinking Gardener's Companion*

Early Spring 2021

**Biomimicry**

**Dirt as Mulch**

**Long Keepers**

**How Plants Drink**

**Don & Lynn Ireland**

**7 Natives from Seed**

**Plants for Dry Shade**

**Pruning & Care  
of Young Trees**





## Waterwise Champions

# Don & Lynn Ireland

Jane Shellenberger



Lynn and Don Ireland spearheaded the transformation of their SE Denver neighborhood landscapes from dull lava rock & junipers to award-winning xeric habitat gardens, saving millions of gallons of water. PHOTO: HARVEYPRO CINEMA

**W**hen Don Ireland began delving into his ancestral roots he started communicating with distant relatives. The outer limbs of the family tree included a woman named Lynn Ireland, a nutritionist with the Colorado WIC (Women, Infants, Children) program and single mother of two. After several months their email exchanges transformed into online romance. When they met in person everything clicked and they married the following year. That was 20 years ago.

Though Lynn always loved gardening she had little time for it. But once the kids grew older she dove right in. The unappealing, outdated landscaping at their Cherry Creek 3 townhouse in south Denver was due for a change; it was mostly lava rock on top of landscape fabric around a lot of junipers. And though they tried, “No one wanted or would take that rock,” says Don. “It was like trying to give away a closetful of leisure suits.” They had to haul it off.

After getting the go-ahead from their HOA Lynn amended and brought in new soil, and planted waterwise perennials and shrubs. At first her neighbors were skeptical but as her colorful, textured garden of xeriscape and regional flowers filled in and came alive with pollinators they took note. “It takes a few years for these plants to become established,” she says. “First they sleep, then they creep, then they leap!” A few years later, in 2012, Lynn also became a founding member of the first Community Garden for Edibles at Cherry Creek 3.

Meanwhile Don, a freelance writer and communicator who

had been an award-winning journalist and stadium announcer in Pittsburgh, was learning about gardening in his own way. He became Cherry Creek 3’s HOA president and for over a decade oversaw renovation of the entire landscape area for the other 250 townhouses. With other HOA officers onboard, he came up with a plan to secure grant funding. Their three main objectives were: to create aesthetically beautiful gardens, to save water, and to increase property values. He says, “It was like going back to college. I researched, made a lot of phone calls, frequented garden centers, and eventually met a whole cast of knowledgeable, helpful characters.”

As the overall plan took shape and funding was secured, the garden renovations began. Once they saw the results, those who had been hesitant or unengaged started asking for a better position in the queue. “It really brought the neighbors together,” says Lynn.

“Over the years we brought in hundreds of yards of amended soil, modified the sprinkler system, planted, and made terrific friends.”

“A lot of people, especially Millennials and Gen-Xers, are sold on the idea of waterwise and regional landscaping,” she says, “but don’t know where to begin. The design part of it just

seems overwhelming.” That’s where pre-planned gardens can be especially helpful: Gardens-in-a-Box offered by various municipalities; Downloadable Designs offered by Plant Select;

and the many Pre-Planned Gardens and Collections available from High Country Gardens online. “We took advantage of all these resources and more,” say the Irelands. “Colorado also has great wholesale and retail nurseries that sell waterwise plants, and increasingly, more Western natives.”

As these renovations were being completed, the Irelands, along with their engaged HOA, began creating gardens next to the HOA building. These gardens have since been included on tours by the Colorado Native Plant Society and Denver Botanic Gardens, as well as featured in a couple of documentary films.

During Don’s term as HOA president the neighborhood reduced its water consumption by 15 million gallons and won several prestigious awards: Audubon Rockies Habitat Hero, Colorado WaterWise Liz Gardener Conservation Award, and the first Plant Select HOA Partner Award. He says many Colorado municipalities and water districts still offer water conserving rebates, for inside and out, and programs to individuals and HOAs throughout the Front Range.

With warmer, drier years predicted and all the thousands of people moving to Colorado every year we can’t ignore water

***“A lot of people are sold on the idea of waterwise and regional landscaping, but don't know where to begin. The design part of it just seems overwhelming. That's where preplanned gardens can be especially helpful.”***



issues, Don says. And while it’s ok to have a small lawn area, the still dominant style of large green thirsty lawns simply isn’t sustainable in our climate.

Don likes to say, self-deprecatingly, “I don’t know why she puts up with me. She’s the rose, I’m the thorn.” But in fact, Don and Lynn are a dynamic, affectionate team with a great sense of humor and, as such, they have accomplished a great deal in terms of water conservation, education, and creating community in their neighborhood. Using 160 different plant species, including 80 North American natives and 40 Colorado natives, they’ve also created an urban oasis of biodiversity that supports birds,

Fledging unirrigated xeriscape garden and Welcome to Denver mural by Denver artist Delton Demarest on the I-225 soundwall at the Yosemite exit adjoining Cherry Creek 3 neighborhood. PHOTO: DON'S DRONES OF DENVER





bees, and butterflies. Lynn's favorite plants are the hyssops (*agastaches*) that bring in so many hummingbirds and the goldenrods (*solidago*) – especially 'Fireworks'.

The Irelands recently spearheaded a project that added a Welcome to Denver mural (by Denver artist Delton Demarest) and waterwise garden to the I-225 sound wall at the Yosemite exit adjoining Cherry Creek 3. With no irrigation it's an exceptionally tough spot to get plants established so they've hauled 5-gallon buckets of water to the site in their truck. This year marks the third growing season so the plants should be getting ready to leap.

Both Lynn and Don are lifelong learners. Lynn became a Master Gardener just last year and says the program has evolved a lot from the days when it was just focused on growing vegetables. Don became an FAA-certified drone pilot during the pandemic. Inspired by small drones

that resemble hummingbirds, Don's Drones of Denver ([www.donsdronesofdenver.com](http://www.donsdronesofdenver.com)) now offers aerial photography and videography, including drone footage of individual yards and gardens around the Front Range. He says the tech is getting better, they use rechargeable batteries, they're swift, and they're monitored every step of the way.

Like it or not, drones are playing an increasing role in society. "While there are the unlicensed naughty guys who illegally deploy drones near airports or try to spy on old girlfriends, drones are now being used to reseed fire-ravaged forests, to monitor irrigation, to find people who are lost in difficult terrain, and even for transporting human organs or other situations where speedy delivery is critical." Getting a bird's eye view can reveal a lot of valuable information, says Don. "A drone may be better than a gnome for your garden."

## Some Principles of Xeriscape

**X**eriscape landscaping promotes water efficiency by using plants that are native and adaptable to Colorado's semi-arid climate. A well-designed Xeriscape can invite wildlife and pollinators, provide year-round interest, and save water.

### • SOIL AMENDMENT

Most plants will benefit from the addition of organic material like compost, though desert plants and plants native to lean soils may not need it. For these, just loosening the soil before planting can sometimes be enough. Colorado has many different ecosystems so "Native" can mean many different growing conditions: semi arid gravelly plains, riparian areas, mountain slopes, etc. Know your plants' needs.

### • EFFICIENT IRRIGATION

Once plants are established, water deeply and infrequently to help them develop deep roots. Drip systems deliver water where it's needed – at the roots. If watering by hand, avoid oscillating sprinklers that throw water high in the air or release a fine mist. When using automatic sprinkling systems, adjust the controller to accommodate weather conditions and install a rain sensor to shut off the device when it rains. To reduce evaporation, never water between 10 am and 6 pm.

### • PLANT ZONES

Different areas in your yard receive different amounts of light, wind and moisture. To minimize water waste, group

together plants with similar light and water requirements, and place them in an area that matches these requirements. Put high-water-use plants in low-lying drainage areas, near downspouts, or in the shade of other plants. Dry, sunny areas or areas far from a hose are great places for low-water-use plants that grow well in our climate.

### • MULCHES

Mulch keeps plant roots cool, prevents soil from crusting, minimizes evaporation, and reduces weed growth. Organic wood mulches should be applied at least 4 inches deep. Because they decompose over time, they're an excellent choice for new beds. As plants mature and spread, they'll cover the mulched areas. But many native and xeric plants prefer inorganic gravel mulches, which should be applied at least 2 inches deep. They rarely need to be replaced and work well in windy spots.

### • TURF ALTERNATIVES

Traditional Kentucky bluegrass is lush and hardy, but requires a substantial amount of water. Allowing it to go dormant (turn brown) in the heat of July will save water without killing it. Reduce the size of your lawn area to also save water. Native or low-water-use plants, patios, decks or mulches can beautify your landscape while saving water. Try planting buffalo grass, blue grama grass, turf-type tall fescue and fine fescues.

