**Water Conscious Landscapes**

Why do we intentionally spend time digging, planting, weeding, pruning, and recreating in our gardens? If your answers include wanting beautiful, healthy plants, great tasting edibles and some green space for the kids to play then your reasons are spot-on.

Is all this possible in semi-arid Colorado which is home to some of the toughest soil conditions handed out by Mother Nature, along with extreme temperature fluctuations and worst of all our minimal natural moisture? You bet, and when it comes to decisions and managing our perpetually dry environment, coupled with acute years of drought, there are simple and very practical garden practices that can be accomplished to match your garden goals.

**Water in Colorado**

Landscapes generally use 50% of all urban residential water.

In normal years Colorado moisture ranges from 13 to 16 inches a year. Compare that to the U.S precipitation average of 35 inches per year. Our year-round water usage for landscapes, indoor, farming and recreation is all dependent on mountain snowpack, natural yearly precipitation, stream flow and reservoir levels. Lower levels of these factors can affect our landscapes, especially during drought years when watering restrictions and policies are put into place by local water districts.

For Colorado residents an enduring management plan for our limited water resources makes great sense and can include these options. When putting in a new landscape start with a design plan that takes into consideration the conditions of the yard (soil type, sun exposure, irrigation choice, etc.) and match these with appropriate trees, shrubs, and perennials. Including more mulched planting beds and hardscaped areas like patios, outdoor kitchens and bricked paths can cut down substantially on watering needs.

For existing yards transition the landscape in phases as time and resources allow. Make smart plant choices along with irrigation upgrades and techniques that align with the minimal watering hand we have been dealt.

**Plant Choices**

Evaluate your existing landscape. Be as objective as you can, your tough plant love impulses may be tested. Which plants are growing well and on average do not require lots of water? Replace the underperforming and water thirsty plants with water wise ones that will give you the look and performance you desire in your garden. You can have it all (or close)—plants with pretty blooms, plants that produce fruits and vegetables, plants that are pollinator friendly, plants with attractive foliage, even a water thrifty lawn, most anything on your list!

Click on the links under resources to find design and low water plant ideas that you can incorporate into your landscape this season and going forward. Your local Garden Center of Colorado can assist you further with suggestions that will work best based on your growing conditions. Bring along landscape photos so their helpful staff is more informed.

All newly planted plants require consistent water the first year or two for their roots to get well established, even if the plant requires less water once it is growing well.

**Efficient Watering Practices**

“Hose draggers” often use less water than people with automatic sprinkler systems. Automatic systems can be reasonably efficient with good design, zoning, maintenance, and management.

When watering plants in the landscape, in some cases, too much water use may be unnecessarily coming from inadequate sprinkler heads or coverage. Fine tune your water efficiency by repairing and correcting the sprinkler system. Check for broken, buried, or missing heads for leaky seals. Make sure all heads are vertical. Use the recommended pressure on the system, a mist cloud indicates too much pressure.

As landscapes change, sprinkler heads often need replacing as well. Avoid mixing different types of heads in the same watering zone; rotor type heads deliver ½ inch per hour; other spray heads deliver 1-2 inches per hour.

In the spring lawns and plant watering needs and run times are generally less. Learn how to adjust your clock and settings to reflect watering requirements from spring through fall. Low cost and super easy to operate, smart irrigation devices are available and operable from your mobile devices. Many include rain sensors, or simply add a sensor to your system. No need to water during or after gully washer rain events and no need to water sidewalks and other hard surfaces either.

Set the sprinkler to run at different start times and divide the run times between starts, this is called cycle and soak—a great way to prevent water run off.

For slopes, water more on the top then the bottom or change the nozzles and direct most of the water uphill. Consider replacing hard to water slopes with terraced plantings using drip emitters.

Drip irrigation using narrow plastic tubing (or lines) and emitters to perennials, trees and shrubs is very water efficient. However, often there are too few drip lines installed at the initial planting for trees and shrubs when the plants are small, this is not forward thinking as the plants grow. Be sure to include enough drip lines to trees and shrubs so they will have adequate water as their root systems grow. Prevent overwatering small trees and shrubs by initially plugging the emitter lines, then years down the road when the plants have increased watering needs, just unplug the emitters.

**Plant and Watering Resources**

Drip Irrigation for Home Gardens

<https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/drip-irrigation-home-gardens-4-702/>

Native Plants

<https://cmg.extension.colostate.edu/gardening-resources/online-garden-publications/native-plants/>

Plant Select®  <https://plantselect.org/>

Plant Select® Downloadable Plant Designs

<https://plantselect.org/design/downloadable-designs/>

Water Wise Landscaping/Xeriscaping

<https://cmg.extension.colostate.edu/gardening-resources/online-garden-publications/water-wise-landscaping-xeriscaping/>

Xeriscaping: Retrofitting your Yard

<https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/garden/07234.pdf>

Xeriscape Turf & Alternatives <https://planttalk.colostate.edu/topics/water-wise-xeriscape/1912-xeriscape-turf-alternatives/>

Xeriscape (pronounced ˈzir-ə-skāp, not zeroscape) is a word derived from Greek and refers to dry habitats. This term was originally coined and popularized by Denver Water. Xeriscape landscape techniques include plants that require little water and practices that efficiently use water and reduce evaporation. Also interchangeable with water wise landscaping

Betty Cahill is a freelance writer and garden instructor. She’s written the popular garden "Punch List" column for the Denver Post for eight years. Betty has been teaching gardening classes around the metro area since the early 2000s. For additional gardening tips, information and garden stories, follow her on her blog at <http://gardenpunchlist.blogspot.com/>.

@Copyright April 2021 Garden Centers of Colorado.