



Water-Wise Landscaping

In 1977, specialists from the Denver Water Department, Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado and Colorado State University developed seven recommendations covering planning, planting and maintenance for water-wise landscaping.

1. Plan your Water-Wise landscape

Evaluate your property. Where is the sun and shade as the day progresses? Where does water collect and where does it run off? Water runs off and evaporates from slopes quickly. Areas exposed to the south and west are more likely to lose water faster. Paving, rock and buildings can raise temperature and increase evaporation. Runoff and evaporation can be slowed with shade trees, terracing and groundcovers.

2. Help your soil retain moisture for optimal root development

Good soil allows water to get to plant roots. A healthy root system uses water efficiently. Ideal soil has 25% air, 25% water, and 50% organic matter. Heavy clay soils need to be loosened to allow water to penetrate to roots. Sandy soils need to be denser to hold water at the root level. Both can be adjusted by amending beds with organic matter such as compost.

3. Right plant, right location

Plants differ in the amount of sun, shade and moisture needed. Research before buying and group in your landscape by size, sun and water needs. Select drought tolerant plants to minimize watering, but all new plantings will need supplemental watering until established. Generally, native plants are more drought tolerant as they evolved without supplemental irrigation, and typically have very deep root systems.

4. Limit turfgrass

Lawns need watering. Limit lawn areas to what is truly needed for outdoor activities. Groundcovers, native grasses, meadow mixes, shrubs and hardscaping can be beautiful and practical water-wise replacements for a traditional turfgrass lawn.

5. Use water strategically

Watering deeply and infrequently encourages healthy root development. Strategically get water to plant roots using drip or surface irrigation. Don't water foliage, driveways and sidewalks. Water in the morning to reduce evaporation.

6. Mulch to improve water retention

Organic mulch retains moisture, reduces soil temperatures, discourages weeds and breaks down to improve soil quality. Wood chips or bark, straw, pine needles or compost should be applied only to 2 to 3 inches deep around plants, but away from the plant crown or trunk. Avoid stone mulch directly surrounding plants, as it doesn't break down to add to soil quality and it reflects heat, increasing the need for water. Weed barrier should only be used with stone mulch since the breakdown of organic mulch will eventually clog the holes in weed barrier and prevent water and nutrients from reaching plant roots.

7. Maintain your landscape

No living landscape is maintenance-free. Weeding, pruning, fertilizing, watering, and insect/disease control will be needed. Good plant selection and placement will minimize maintenance.

Additional Resources:

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/planning-and-designing-your-home-landscape>

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/making-and-using-compost-in-the-garden>

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/choosing-right-landscape-plants-factors-consider>

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/article-topic/native-naturalize-selection>

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/best-practices-for-watering-yards-and-gardens>

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/drought-and-watering-ornamental-plants>

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/2024/07/01/keeping-your-plants-healthy-dealing-with-dry-soils-and-drought/>