



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Cooperative Extension

Master Gardener

The Benefits of Xeriscape

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Depending where you previously lived, moving to SaddleBrooke may seem like you have landed on another planet. Looking at the various landscapes around your neighborhood, most of the plants are different from those we've known and grown. But it can be an exciting experience to let go of the familiar and embrace the new world of desert gardening.



Growing plants in the high desert can prove extremely challenging. While warmth and sunshine provide for a year-round growing season, the intense heat, lack of rainfall and harsh winds make water a precious commodity and serve to influence the plants that will survive here. The soils are alkaline, rocky, lack organic matter, are predominately clay, and relatively low in essential nitrogen.



Xeriscape refers to a landscaping method that utilizes drought tolerant plants to conserve water. In addition to low water usage plants, Xeriscape also takes into consideration proper landscape planning and design, soil improvement, efficient irrigation practices, use of mulches, and appropriate maintenance. Drip irrigation is the preferred method to provide supplemental water to plants since it distributes a low volume over an extended period of time to (1) water deeply, (2) places water only where needed, and (3) reduces water loss due to evaporation.

Xeriscapes, while conserving water, can still provide an abundance of color, texture, variety and interest to the landscape. The most obvious approach to Xeriscape in the desert is to use native plants since they grow naturally here and are accepting of the soils and harsh growing conditions. Another advantage of natives is that many of them are legumes, being able to produce their own nitrogen as a solution to the low level of nutrients generally found in desert soils.

Besides native plants, there are many desert- adapted plants from other areas that will grow here in SaddleBrooke and serve to expand the variety and enhance creativity in the landscape. Some may require a little more water and fertilizer to flourish, but they are worth it. There are numerous choices of trees and shrubs to anchor the landscape and provide shade and screening if necessary. Groundcovers can serve to soften and break up rock mulch and hard surfaces. Vines will provide a

backdrop for other plants and act to obscure walls and fences. Annuals and perennials bring color and seasonal interest to the garden. Ornamental grasses enhance the yard with unique beauty and textures, and make it come alive with motion in the wind. Cacti and succulents are true Xeriscape champions utilizing the least amount of water while providing a unique interest to the desert landscape and very low maintenance.

Time is well spent researching desert- adapted plants before purchasing. The Internet, publications, and local nurseries are great sources of information. Pay particular attention to the cold hardiness of any plant you are considering for the landscape. Will it survive winter temperatures of 15 -20 degrees Fahrenheit which are possible in SaddleBrooke? What about sun exposure? Does it tolerate sun, part shade, or shade, and how does this match its desired location in the yard? Mature size will determine if the location will provide enough space for seasons of growth, and the rate of growth (slow, moderate or fast) can help estimate how much maintenance will be needed. Look to see if dwarf varieties are available since these grow less than six inches a year and require less pruning. Water requirements will determine the amount of supplemental irrigation the plant will require. The flowering description will tell during which season the plant flowers and the color of the blossoms.



Purchasing desert- adapted plants is best done at a reputable local nursery. Specimens found here are stocked for growing in our region. Personnel at local nurseries can be a wealth of knowledge about plants, and don't forget to mention SaddleBrooke, since we live at a higher elevation than Tucson and can experience colder temperatures in the winter. Look at potential plants closely for good health and vigor. Gently remove it from its pot and examine the roots. Fine roots should be visible around the root ball, but the plant shouldn't be extremely root bound or have large circling roots.



When planting, again make certain the desired location provides the right amount of sunlight and allows space for the mature size of the plant. The hole should be at least 2X larger than the root ball, but no deeper. Desert-adapted plants require no amendments so just backfill the hole with desert soil. With the exception of cacti (wait a few days for roots to heal to water) the plant should be watered immediately and will require extra irrigation for the first few weeks until its root system is established. Determine if the plant requires supplemental irrigation on a regular basis and add drip emitters accordingly. Cacti and succulents should not be on drip irrigation, but can benefit from some supplemental irrigation every couple of

weeks during the warmer times of the year (May-June) when there has been no substantial rainfall. Most desert-adapted plants can benefit from an application of an organic, slow release nitrogen fertilizer once a year in the spring.

Welcome to the desert and get ready to experience a whole new world of gardening. Xeriscaping with desert-adapted plants can save water, reduce maintenance, and create a landscape full of beauty, color, variety, and interest in the high desert.