

Xeriscapes—Drought-Tolerant Gardens

The word is Greek, the idea is Mediterranean and the result can save you water, time and effort. A 'xeric' garden doesn't mean sand and cactus for your yard. Rather, it means choosing common garden plants that are drought tolerant once established, using more New England natives and designing your garden to minimize the need for water.

Let's start with bulbs. What would spring be without daffodils or hyacinths? These hardy flowers from Turkey need water in the fall and spring (when it usually rains in New England), but are unaffected by all but the very driest summers. Established astilbes and hostas thrive throughout the summer in dry shade and only prolonged drought will stop summer bloomers such as black-eyed susans or yarrow. Clethra bushes provide beauty throughout the growing season be it wet or dry, and trees such as spruce and ash once established in a site can withstand even the driest years.

So what makes a xeric garden different from what you may already have? Probably very little. There are some plants that are just thirsty. If you are looking to reduce your water use, you probably will want to reduce the number of plants such as iris and certain maples which need lots of water throughout the growing season. Plant trees that will provide shade for plants that don't demand full sun, reducing their water needs, and perhaps cooling your home through the summer as well. Place plants with similar water needs together so when you do water, you can water just as much as each area needs.

Add compost to the soil when planting; it holds water without becoming soggy. Keep beds cool and moist with two to three inches of mulch (more than this amount will not allow the water to percolate down to the soil, less will allow water to evaporate out). Weed frequently so that as plants become established and don't have to face competition for water.

Lawns are non-native plants that demand large quantities of water when rainfall is at its lowest. Reducing the size of your lawn, watering it less frequently, and overseeding with less water-dependent mixtures are all water saving strategies.

When you do water or irrigate, do it efficiently. Water early in the morning (before 9 a.m.) or after 8 p.m. Watering in mid-day can cause you to lose half your water to evaporation. Avoid automatic sprinklers but, if you must use them, shut them off during rain or after substantial showers. Make certain you are watering your yard and not your driveway, sidewalk or street.

Your xeric garden will be as bright and beautiful as any other. The secret is that it will save you water, money and work. And isn't that something we all want in our gardens? A list of drought-tolerant plants especially suited to New England gardens is on the back of this sheet. And remember: New England natives evolved in this climate and often offer low maintenance and deer resistance while being tolerant our climates extremes.