

XERISCAPE & SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPE DESIGN

A natural and organic approach to landscape and garden care begins with an assessment of the landscape and incorporates sustainable Xeriscape principles whenever possible.

The 7 Xeriscape principles

1. **Planning and Design:**

Careful design is crucial to the success of a Xeriscape landscape.

- Group plants with similar water requirements.
- Increase shade areas to decrease the water needs of plants.
- Preserve areas of native vegetation.

2. **Soil Analysis:**

Florida soils are mostly sand with very little ability to absorb or hold water.

Adding organic matter to the soil improves its water retention. However, due to Florida's high humidity and temperatures, organic matter breaks down quickly. Planting native or adapted plants in the right soil may eliminate the need for soil improvements.

3. **Plant Selection:**

Putting the right plant in the right spot is the key to a successful Xeriscape. Select native plants and those adapted to the wet and dry extremes of the Florida climate. Group together plants that require frequent irrigation and keep these groupings to a minimum.

4. **Use Turf Wisely**

Grass tends to **use more water and require more maintenance** than any other part of the landscape. Therefore, grass should be limited to areas used for recreation and leisure as much as possible. Consider alternatives to grass such as attractive ground covers, decks, patios, and walkways made of permeable materials.

5. **Irrigate Efficiently:**

Grouping plants according to their water needs maximizes irrigation efficiency. Select correct irrigation heads for the type of plants being watered. Inspect your system weekly.

Do:

- Reduce irrigation during the rainy summer and dormant winter.
- Use rain gauges and a rain shut-off device to avoid over-watering.
- Irrigate during early morning hours when evaporation is minimal.

6. **Mulches:**

Use natural mulches for walkways as well as within the planting beds. Mulches reduce watering needs, weeds, erosion, etc.

7. **Practice proper maintenance:**

- **Don't:** Over-water or over-fertilize. Over-watering increases water costs, disease, and insect problems. Over-fertilizing promotes fast but weak growth and increases water consumption.
- **Do:** Raise mower blades for a higher cut, encouraging grass roots to grow deeper. Prune plants regularly- this prevents overgrowth, encourages healthy growth and keeps water needs to a minimum.

For more
information



Download [Xeriscape principles for Florida gardening](#), a PDF brochure by the Southwest Florida Water Management District.

Xeriscape principles were created by Denver Water in 1982 in response to local drought conditions. Although Xeriscape principles were originally established to promote water conservation, they apply to all aspects of environmentally responsible landscape management.

Along with other areas of the country where water conservation is a serious issue, these principals were quickly adopted for Florida gardening. The increasing population, and its taxation on the water supply, has demanded the promotion of these Xeriscape principles by the Water Management Districts. In addition, the University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service promotes these principles, along with a few additional ones, in their [Florida Yards & Neighborhoods program](#). "Florida Friendly Landscaping" also encourages attracting wildlife, protecting waterfronts, reducing storm water runoff, composting yard wastes, and responsible pest control.

Xeriscape design criterion, in addition to being environmentally friendly, offers a vast assortment of diverse choices for landscape design. In Florida, considerations for plant selection include the water and nutritional needs of the plant without sacrificing the beauty associated with a tropical climate. Plant selection also takes into consideration the desire to attract butterflies, birds and other wildlife. Zones are established that require varying degrees of care, and native plants along with exotic tropicals are carefully placed in the landscape to create a visual impact while keeping maintenance to a minimum.

Turf is also selected for minimum maintenance and kept for high use areas. Conventional landscapes often include vast expanses of lawn that require heavy watering and regular applications of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. Rather than maintaining the sterile uniformity of the American lawn, a variety of grasses and flowering ground covers offer a creative alternative. For those areas where lawn is the best choice, least-toxic sustainable turf care practices must be established.

For a sustainable landscape to be established [soil health](#) is the next consideration.

