

Seven Basic Principles of Xeriscape

A quick etymology lesson: “xeriscape”

From: *xeros*—Greek for “dry” and *scape*—meaning “a picture”

Pronounced “*zeri scape*” (There is no zero in it!)

1. Reduce the amount of lawn—at least 50%

Reduce the amount of lawn. Lawns are generally the most water-intensive part of a landscape. In terms of the environment, they are habitat deserts for native animals. About the only animal that likes them is grackles!

2. Develop a good landscape design

- a. works well for the owner’s intended uses, i.e., if owners have pets, an area should be provided for pets to use; if owners want to plant a vegetable garden, that area should be allowed; if owners have children, a play area should be included; etc.
- b. groups plant materials by similar water, soil and sun requirements
- c. considers property’s regional ecosystem and microclimates
- d. accommodates what is already there-- structures, large trees, utilities, etc.
- e. is affordable

3. Choose xeric plants (natives!)

Doug Tallamy recommends natives should make up a minimum of 50% of the plants in the landscape. Closer to 100% is better and serves the environment better.

4. Amend your soil if needed—or add soil if necessary

If you are planting natives, amendments should be minimal, probably just some compost. In the Hill Country where the soil is very thin, raised beds may be needed in some areas. However, remember that if planting Hill Country natives, many will do fine in the thin soil. Don’t plan to haul in large amounts of topsoil because many natives do poorly in rich soil.

5. Mulch bare ground

Native mulches, not the dyed stuff sold at the big box stores, works best. Occasionally rocks or gravel is used for areas such as cactus or rock gardens. Mulch helps preserve soil moisture and moderates soil temperatures—cooler in summer and warmer in winter than the surrounding air.

6. Use water efficiently

Use water efficiently. Water is precious and limited, especially in Comal County. Don’t waste it. Drip irrigation is the most efficient, but not always practical. Actually hand watering is also efficient because plants are targeted and water isn’t generally wasted. Sprinklers that produce large drops and keep the spray low to the ground are preferred to those that throw water high in the air or produce a fine mist. Evaporation is high in both instances. Irrigation systems should not use the emitters that produce a fine mist.

7. Practice good maintenance

- a. avoid chemicals-- The use of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides is generally not needed. Natives can be killed with too much fertilizer and native good bugs can be killed with pesticides.
- b. mow to correct height – Any lawn grass should be mowed high to protect roots from the sun.
- c. prune natives correctly --Learn the correct pruning practices for native plants. They generally aren’t handled like many of the common non-natives. If pruning is done correctly, plants are healthier and prettier.