

With the winter solstice behind us, the days are getting longer. This combined with the unusually warm temperatures leaves me thinking more about next season's garden than about typical winter activities like skiing. To further draw me into my gardening daydreams is the seed catalog that came in yesterday's mail. It is the first I have gotten this season, and it means that many others will soon be pouring into my mailbox.

This will be my first full spring in my new house. It will also be the first opportunity I have had to grow in both full sun and partial shade. My previous home offered minimal space outside the shade of an old oak tree and Japanese maple. This house, like my last, is only new to me. It held another family for ten years before embracing mine. While there are many benefits to a "lived-in" home and landscape, including mature plantings, there are also many drawbacks. Someone else placed her mark on the landscape before me, and it does not reflect my style nor my plant preferences.

In an effort to make this landscape and home my own, I spent much of last fall removing unwanted plants and sharing them with neighbors who could use them. All the plants I cared to keep were transplanted into raised beds I created to serve initially as nursery beds and later as vegetable plots. This has left me with a virtually clean slate from which to begin my landscape.

For the first time ever I will have the opportunity to "practice what I preach." This spring will mark my entry into the world of xeriscape gardening. "Xeriscape," may be an unfamiliar term to some. It was coined by a coalition of members of the green (landscape) industry and the Denver Water Authority. This coalition defined "xeriscape" as: "water conservation through creative landscaping." Over the years, xeriscaping has been inappropriately defined as "dry only," "rocks and gravel only," or "lawn-less landscaping." Actually, xeriscaping is the implementation of seven basic gardening principles to reduce the demand for supplemental watering.

The first principal of creating a xeriscape is "Planning and designing." This is what I will be working on for the remainder of this winter. I will take a survey of the existing vegetation on my site. I have already made good progress by eliminating many of the plantings and keeping only what I like, but I plan to look a little more closely at what remains, perhaps eliminating some based on their health and condition. Along with looking at the plant material, now is also the time for me to think about how I want my plantings to relate to my house and shed and even the little playhouse in the back corner of the lot. I know I want a simple pallet at the front door to welcome my guests, and more vibrant plantings near the deck to lift spirits on those days I entertain. The gardening shed sits in the shade and will need some special consideration, while the playhouse needs to be safe and inviting for young visitors. Having lived in this home for nine months now, I have also noted a few slopes that demand attention, as well as a wind pattern that will limit some of my planting choices. Additionally, I have a good sense of just how much sun and shade reach certain areas of my landscape. With all these things in mind, now is when I will put pencil to paper and come up with a plan and a design.

“Improving the soil” is the next principal in creating a xeriscape. Healthy, beautiful plants are only possible when grown in the proper soil conditions. Before I make my final planting decision I am going to have a soil test run. It is imperative to know the nutrient levels, pH and organic matter content of the soil. This will allow me to choose the most appropriate plant material for my landscape. It will also provide the base information necessary for me to begin improving the soil. Most likely I will need to add organic matter, such as compost to improve the soil’s structure and water holding capacity. Adjustment to the pH may also be necessary, as it can improve nutrient uptake by plants, and may improve the effectiveness of fertilizers.

The third principal of xeriscape is “irrigate efficiently.” Adjusting irrigation practices can reduce water usage by 70 percent. I will be sure to only water my plantings in late evening and early morning when evaporation is at its lowest. I will install drip irrigation, in the form of soaker hoses should any supplemental watering be necessary once my plantings have established themselves. This type of irrigation will allow me to apply water directly to the soil surface so that more of it can be taken up by the plant and less evaporated from the plant surfaces. I do not own a sprinkler, and do not intend to purchase one, but a rain barrel may get added to my spring shopping list.

The fourth principle of xeriscape is “limit turf area.” This does not imply that I cannot have a lawn, it just means the lawn should only be the size necessary to meet the needs of the traffic and outdoor activities it must support. I have two dogs that need some space to run, so I have to keep that in mind. However, I can minimize my lawn by adding shrubs, groundcovers, native grasses and other plantings, particularly on the front slope that is greater than 20 percent. I may even add some hardscaping in the form of a patio to reduce the lawn area. A smaller lawn will mean a reduced application of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, resulting in less cost and less risk of groundwater contamination from run-off. Reducing my lawn size will also allow me to save time dedicated to mowing. During the growing season I push mow for about two hours a week. My goal is to cut that almost in half, and not by purchasing a riding mower, rather by reducing the size of the lawn.

“Selecting appropriate plant material” is the fifth principle of xeriscape. When I finally choose plants, I will consider the conditions of the site, and what features they will demand from a plant. I plan to choose plants that will grow well in the existing soil, climate and drainage conditions of my site and avoid trying to force plants to adapt. I intend to steer clear of plants that demand too much water, and instead choose drought tolerant varieties.

The sixth xeriscape principle is “Mulch.” I will apply a two to four inch layer of organic mulch such as shredded hardwood or pine needles to help suppress weed growth, reduce soil moisture losses, reduce plant contact with soil borne pathogens, provide food for soil organisms, protect against temperature fluctuations, improve the soil structure and protect shallow roots.

Another consideration is the size of the mulched areas. The previous owners of my home did little mulching and what mulching was around trees is no bigger than a tire. This type of mulching serves the purpose of protecting the trunk against weed whacker and mower damage, but it does little to eliminate root competition and maintain moisture. I plan to extend mulched areas to the drip line of the tree, or the tips of the branches. This means that as the tree grows, so will the mulched area.

“Maintain it properly” is the seventh and perhaps most important principle of xeriscape. Proper plant maintenance results in stronger, healthier plants that are better suited to withstand drought. Maintenance should take place at the right time of year. Pruning or fertilizing at the wrong time can weaken plants, making them more susceptible to insect and disease damage, while increasing their need for water. I will follow the pruning and fertilizing calendar I have created for clients over the years or one of the guides that are available from the extension office. If I am ever unsure about when to perform maintenance I will check with a fellow local plantsman to find out how best to care for my landscape.

I am looking forward to painting the blank canvas that is my current garden and for the opportunity to create a truly water friendly, xeriscape landscape. Now, back to the drafting table...