

This year, Charlottesville area residents are reminded of the cold temperatures and snows that define winter, and while many have welcomed this “true winter,” few will embrace it if it lasts too long.

Although winter is still upon us, gardeners know that it will soon be the time when crocuses and daffodils begin to awake from their winter slumbers, push back their blankets of mulch and emerge into world for another spring showing.

Unfortunately, as spring arrives, many gardeners may find their enthusiasm dampened and dreams of tending a beautiful garden clouded because of memories of last year’s drought beaten garden. Until last summer, many thought that the answer to avoiding the effects of drought on the landscape was to use irrigation. What we learned was that in times of extreme drought landscape irrigation is considered a non-essential use of water and falls below personal safety, health and hygiene on the list of priorities when faced with limited supply; this was true for well and public water users alike.

While last summer was hot, dry and disappointing to many gardeners, it did not have to be. For some time now, a trend called “Xeriscaping” has been spreading through the gardening world, and for those gardeners who had already joined in the movement, last summer’s weather had minimal effect.

“Xeriscape,” may be an unfamiliar term. 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. These principles can be applied to gardens of all types, and many gardeners already practice at least a few of the principles. With some thought and planning, almost any garden can be converted to a xeriscape.

If your memories of last year’s garden are not fond, turn your garden into a xeriscape and enjoy the beauty it will display regardless of the weather. Start by taking a good look around your property.

The first principal of creating a xeriscape is “Planning and designing.” This does not require that you be a landscape designer, nor that you hire a professional to assist you. Rather, examine the conditions of your site, and jot them down for further review. Take note of the site’s existing vegetation. If you have an existing landscape that you are considering updating, note all the plants on site, their health and condition, and your desire to keep or discard them. Also examine the buildings on the site, and how the plantings relate to them. Consider slopes, views, areas of sun and shade, and the wind patterns across the site. Make particular note of areas needing attention. Do not overlook the desired uses of the site when planning. Determine if garden bed space is required, if a patio area is essential to meet your needs, or if you must have a level location to set up the kids’ swing set. Once you have a good sense of the site’s conditions and your needs you can develop a plan that will be sure to meet your needs and desires, in the most effective and beautiful manner possible.

“Improving the soil” is the next principal in creating a xeriscape. Healthy, beautiful plants are only possible when grown in the proper soil conditions. It is imperative you know the

nutrient levels, pH and organic matter content of the soil. This will allow you to choose the most appropriate plant material for the site. It will also provide the base information necessary if you wish to begin improving the soil. Organic matter, such as compost can be added to improve a soil's structure and water holding capacity. pH adjustment can improve nutrient uptake by plants, and may improve the effectiveness of fertilizers.