

Earth-friendly xeriscaping is on the other side of the spectrum. Using native plant materials not only reduces the need for physical maintenance but also minimizes the need for chemical applications, added mulch and water. Non-native plants can also bring pest and disease to the area. For years, experienced landscape designers have encouraged local growers to buy and raise native plants instead of importing them. Consider the bottlebrush buckeye or staghorn sumac, plants with year-round interest and tolerance for adverse soil conditions.

When planning your garden with water conservation in mind, choose plants according to their future habitat, and gauge sunlight intensity, terrain, drainage patterns, wind exposure, surrounding root systems, tree canopies and types of surrounding trees, vegetation and deer populations.

First, make sure rainwater will still flow through the garden once any desired construction and plantings are implemented. Also, plan for hardscapes and shade structures such as arbors and trellises, both of which reduce water loss during the hot months and cut down on interior cooling bills. Patios and decks expand the outdoor living area and minimize garden space and the need for water.

Planting considerations are the next step. Groundcovers generally require less water than turf and provide shade for the soil, reducing transpiration. As a bonus, groundcovers, unlike turf, are not prone to disease and insect infestations. If turf is still your heart's desire, choose turf-type tall fescues, says Dr. Tom Turner, turfgrass extension and research specialist. And keeping grass 2 1/2 to 3 inches tall minimizes evaporation and prevents many grassy weeds like crabgrass from germinating.

Among the plants that can tolerate drought conditions, ornamental grasses and needle-leaved evergreens are the most popular. Plants with minimal leaf size retain water vapor more effectively. Broad-leaved plants do best in areas protected from wind and, in some cases, under tree canopy.

Many gardeners are convinced that mulch is the key to conserving water while reducing weeds, but deep mulch prevents water absorption. As mulch decomposes, it draws water out of the ground and destroys soil texture. Maryland Cooperative Extension advises against spreading more than 1 inch of shredded hardwood bark mulch. Using less mulch can reduce evaporation by 90 percent. In addition, beware of the colored mulch, which can suck nitrogen and nutrients out of the soil. Try to recycle mulch, and steer clear of regularly replenishing this damaging cover.

The introduction of a water feature in your landscape can ease the intensity of a hot, dry day, and it doesn't have to be elaborate to be effective. A simple bubbler in a ceramic bowl provides movement and sound, and even the suggestion of water through some well-placed river rocks can be calming.

We may not be able to change the world, but with xeriscaping, we can easily change our own back yards. **SAI**

OPPOSITE Water, an ever-important resource, can be conserved with xeriscaping, a landscape option that uses minimal moisture.

Photo courtesy Petro Design/Build, Inc.

BELOW Groundcovers are an eco-friendly option because they retain water better than traditional mulch.



Kathleen Litchfield is the president of Petro Design/Build Inc., a landscape design company in Mitchellville. She has been consulting, designing and teaching landscape practices for 28 years.