XERISCAPING

Have You Heard About It?

This new word was coined some years ago in Denver from the Greek 'xeros' (dry) to describe the way of landscaping which requires minimal use of water. With more and more severe droughts the idea quickly spread to the west and south, along with many demonstration gardens. It is now coming to the sweeping eastern lawns of mainly English gardening heritage (alas, minus the Isles gentle mists). It is an idea whose time has come. What could be simpler than arranging the greenery around us in a way that makes it drought resistant, attractive and care free? A good way to start is with a good plan. If you would like to prepare your expensive planting for declining water tables, watering bans, and escape from bills and some back breaking chores, include in your yard the following:

- Improve the soil by adding organic matter. Such soil will hold moisture better.
- Use groundcovers and mulch to retain water and cool the roots. Both materials have rough, uneven surfaces which slow the water down and keep it where it belongs, in the soil. Mulch cannot exceed 4 inches in depth and if it is not raked it will form a crust that sheds water.
- Make your lawn smaller. Lawns shed and evaporate vast quantities of water and account for up to 90% of water use. Plant shrub borders (deciduous shrubs are inexpensive and grow fast, offering flowers and fruits in abundance), experiment with meadows or patches of stoloniferous shrubs that colonize sizable areas. All these measures are also cheaper than lawn maintenance. Lawns will survive the summer intact, water or no water. They have a natural cycle of green—buff—green, thus marking spring—summer—fall. Trees and shrubs begin to look dusty in summer, which is natural, too.
- Use grouncovers and mulch to retain water and cool the roots. Both materials have rough, uneven surfaces which slow the water down and keep it where it belongs, in the soil.
- Limit the extent of your lawn. Lawns shed and evaporate vast quantities of water and account for up to 90% of water use. Plant shrub borders (deciduous shrubs are inexpensive and grow fast, offering flowers and fruits in abundance), experiment with meadows or patches of stoloniferous shrubs that colonize large areas. All these measures are also cheaper than lawn maintenance. Lawns will survive the summer intact, water or no water. They have a natural cycle of green—buff—green, thus marking spring—summer—fall. Trees and shrubs begin to look dusty in summer, which is natural, too.
- Watch for trouble. When plants have additional stresses, besides coping with dry weather, they will use more water.
- If you have to resort to watering try efficient drip irrigation, localized soakers, and—for the new lawn—sprinklers, very early in the morning. Drip irrigation uses 1/2 gal/hr with every drop used by the plants. The garden hose uses 300–600 gal/hr, depending on the diameter of the hose, and most of the water is lost in surface runoff.

- Leaving seeds to mature on perennials and shrubs slows growth and water requirements. It also sets the table for the birds.
- Use drought tolerant plants. Plants native to our region have a proven record of surviving the worst extremes. It is safe to assume that most gray leaf plants do well in dry places. They are gray to shield the leaves from excessive water evaporation. There are also green plants that can stand drought. Here is a short list:

TREES: pines, red cedar, many oaks, hackberry *(Celtis occidentalis)*, box elder, honey locust, black locust, sassafras, black cherry *(Prunus serotina),* crabapples, sycamore *(Platanus occidentalis),* hawthorn, cucumber magnolia *(M. acuminata),* American smoke tree *(Cotinus obovatus)*, yellowwood.

SHRUBS: bayberry, sweetfern *(Comptonia peregrina),* witchhazel *(Hamamelis virginiana),* junipers, beach plum *(Prunus maritima),* sand cherry *(Prunus besseyi),* sumacs, bottle-brush buckeye *(Aesculus parviflora),* Virginia and Carolina rose, fothergilla, leucothoe, mountain laurel, blackhaw *(Viburnum prunifolium),* nannyberry *(Viburnum lentago)*.

GROUNDCOVERS: low height shrubs such as *Amelanchier stolonifera, Ceanothus ovatus,* New Jersey tea (*Ceaaothus americanus),* Coralberry 'Hancock' *(Symphoricarpos chenaultii),* St. Johnswort, bearberry, fragrant sumac 'Grow-Low' *(Rhus aromatica),* low blueberry, junipers, box huckleberry *(Gaylussacia brachycera),* bearberry *(Arctostaphyllos uva-ursi)*.

PERENNIALS: ornamental grasses, many herbs, pentstemon, salvia, rudbeckia, phlox, New England asters, columbine *(Aquilegia canadensis),* sunflowers, gaillardia, coral bells, twinleaf, butterfly flower *(Asclepias tuberosa),* beebalm, false indigo *(Baptisia australis),* liatris, purple coneflower, Stokes aster, coreopsis, yucca.

All these methods combined should reduce your water consumption by about 80%, cut the water bill considerably and allow you more time in the hammock. If you would like to learn more about this truly common sense concept, or visit demonstration gardens, write the National Xeriscape Council, Box 163172, Austin TX 78716–3172. There are also some good books, like “Taylor's Guide to Water Saving Garden”, or Beth Chato's “The Dry Garden”.

Does it all mean there is no place for water in such a landscape? Of course not. There is a great untapped source of water in your garden—the roof of the house. The water flowing from downspouts can be redirected for various purposes. It can feed a most charming clay pond with many moisture loving plants around it. It can cascade down a course of stones in small intermittent waterfalls. It can trickle down an old-fashioned rain barrel to a bird bath. For the lazy approach, it can even feed a choice tree native to a bog that you might wish to have close to the house.

The passive use of water (no pumps), from sources above the garden, has been carried to perfection in places like Villa d'Este in Italy where the play of water from the river above makes the garden. In Kashmir the Himalayan snows feed the enchanted garden of Shalimar. You can let your little fantasy come true thanks to the roof of your house.