Xeriscape – Where To Start and What To Consider

A new trend is coming to Tulsa – the Xeriscape, or the water saving garden.   The root of the term "Xeriscape" refers to "without water".   That is, low-water gardens. Google brings images of cacti, rocks capes, succulents, gut-savoring Mexican food, and heat!   In desert areas this type of landscape is the norm.   So, is Tulsa taking the trend?   With the continued hotter and dryer conditions we're experiencing, it appears so.

Plan and design, the basic ascetics and principal of design, remain at the forefront. Water-saving design at its core would respect the local flavor.   In Oklahoma, this translates to your yard in August closely resembling the dust bowl plus tumbleweeds, and we would all just ignore the stone-cold-stare from the neighbor, who waters their lawn five times a day.   Consider function, proportion, style, color and texture.   The style of the Xexi typically involves a rock-mulch cover.   Locally native plants are the shining stars and provide the proportion, color and texture.

Being in a 6a-b USDA Hardiness Zone, a 100-year old Sequoia or Agave may not be the best choice.   But, you want that look, so what do you do?

Soil quality is the biggest issue for the Oklahoma Xeriscape.   Dependent on the desires and ascetics, consider the following issues: the nature of the soil, the location, and the season.   It seems the largest issue with this type of gardening in Oklahoma is the wet season coupled with a lot of clay soils.   When mature succulents range in the $100-300 price range, it's a very important point to consider.   A soil drainage test should always be performed before considering the Phoenix-style ascetic.   Amendments to the soil can be easily made.   However, eventual root depth should be taken into account.

With the natural water table relatively close, it doesn't take much digging to come up with clay soils.   Large succulents and other water-saving selections can easily penetrate into this clay level dependent on size, depth and time.   The best course of action?   Consult an expert before starting your adventure/project.

Knowing your landscape helps to develop the best course of action and plant selection. For instance, you may have the one spot in your yard that is a swamp from March to May.   There, a dry garden rock bed would be more advised than a large yucca.

The "why" of the Xeriscape is also a vital addition to the calculation.   Many "whys" include the desire for fresh-water conservation, being fed up with moving the watering device, the overall green grass struggle, or simply the ascetics of the desert-inspired landscape.   No single one consideration trumps the other, but all should be considered and thoroughly explored before the plans hit the page.

The environmental benefits should be countered with the longevity of the plant choices, naturally available water sources, and native drought-loving plants vs imports.   While the eco benefit of an imported cacti garden likely won't stand to outweigh the impact of the biofuels and importation, native drought-loving plants are not only the most economical, but sometimes the best environmental choice if the desire is eco impact. Consider that the ascetics of the prairie-style rock garden, however, are vastly different than what you will see at your favorite snow-bird friends' house in Scottsdale, Arizona.

References on the best plant selections are readily available through your local Master Gardener office.   Or, click on OSU Fact Sheet L-332 for more information.   In the spring, local nurseries will often have a selection of "Oklahoma Native" or "Oklahoma Proven" flowers, herbs and landscaping.   Good advice is to research it to death as do the experts.   More importantly, ask those who have tried and failed!

In the words of Thomas A. Edison "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that it won't work".   If that isn't the true essence of gardening, what is?

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