

GLORIOUS GARDENS... WITHOUT WATER!

XERISCAPE GAINS IN POPULARITY AS CONSERVATION RULES BECOME COMMONPLACE

Once upon a time in South Florida, the sights and sounds of lawnmowers and sprinklers filled the air, like another "Pleasant Valley Sunday." It was a simpler time, or so it seems, long before the population exploded and water became a scarce commodity.

Today, South Florida faces bold new challenges. Water conservation, once a futuristic concept, is now a reality that affects our daily lives. Local ordinances restricting outdoor water use have become commonplace.

To their credit, however, many South Floridians have figured out a way to turn this new reality to their advantage. They've discovered a low-cost, low-maintenance, low-stress way to beat the water shortage. They've not only discovered, but embraced xeriscaping.

So what exactly is xeriscape, you ask? No, it's not an alien life form. Although it is a life form. Actually, many life forms.

The term comes from combining the Greek word *xeros*, which means "dry," with the English word landscape.

It was coined in the late 1970s by the Denver, Colo. water department to name a new style of landscaping that was taking place there. A landscaping design that promoted native plants and flowers that didn't require additional irrigation — thus easing the water shortage in drought-stricken western states.

Since then, other areas of the country have adopted similar programs. One of those areas is right here in "water-challenged" South Florida.

Clearly, this type of landscaping requires thinking outside the box. But for the conservation-minded, there are huge benefits. In addition to actually being more colorful and vibrant than traditional lawns, xeriscape can cut your

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water bills in half, while lowering your time and fees on maintenance.

Where sprawling lawns once dominated the landscape, you can now feast your eyes on a dazzling rainbow of colorful plants and flowers such as violet amaranth, gold Lady Baring, crimson wild sage, yellow striped bromeliads, pink crown of thorns, blue flax lilies and blazing orange milkweed.

But as beautiful as these gardens are, the greatest reward of all is perhaps an intangible. It's the way you feel about having conserved water and energy at a time when we all need to do our part. In addition, xeriscaping relies heavily on native vegetation, which increases available habitat for native butterflies, bees and fauna. And it also reduces our dependence on lawn fertilizers, the phosphate runoff of which seeps into the Everglades.

Merry Mott is a director at the Florida Nursery Growers & Landscape Association in Orlando. "Homeowners around the state realize that water resources are at a premium, in both quantity and quality," Mott said. "Even home developments are making green practices standard, which in turn promotes a sense of pride among residents of the community."

Locally, nursery growers have understood this for quite some time and have adapted to meet the growing need. Tom Scannell is the owner of Bougainvillea Growers International, a 67-acre nursery in Boynton Beach that specializes in dozens of varieties of Bougainvillea — a vibrant, drought-resistant species of flowering plants. ►



(Left) A foxtail fern and a mammy croton stand out against the multicolored rocks. (Below) Local landscaper Lesley Michael said this dracaena "Song of India" is one of his favorites because it is a hardy plant that adds a touch of color.



(Left)
The owner of this xeriscape garden in Delray Beach wanted to layer different shades of green against various colors of rocks and boulders. Shown here, agave are available in a wide variety of colors and sizes.



(Far left) The point of xeriscape is to create a visually pleasing landscape using plants and other materials that require little to no irrigation water. (Left) Mammy crotons add a kaleidoscope of color to this xeriscape.

It seems that a growing number of homeowners in Valencia Palms are slowly but surely embracing this new landscaping approach.

Irwin and Joyce Slurzberg moved into their new home there in October 2006. "We had a more traditional lawn when we first moved in," Irwin said. "We were definitely ready for a new look. I loved the idea of matching different rocks and boulders with specific plants, like Japanese blueberry and green striped agave."

Since the changeover, neighbors have been constantly commenting on the distinctive look of their lawn.

Green awareness was also front and center for the Slurzbergs. "The idea of planting an environmentally friendly lawn was certainly a consideration," Irwin said. "It's a good feeling. We're just sorry we didn't do it sooner."

Clearly, a new day has dawned in South Florida. And those "Pleasant Valley Sunday" sounds you're hearing now? Why, it's the *oohs* and *ahs* of people passing by, marveling at the sheer elegance that is xeriscape! ■

(Above) The red hardscaping and the variegated agave against the background of blue agave adds color and dimension to the landscape.

(Right) Bougainvillea in full bloom.



"No doubt about it. Xeriscape is the future of South Florida," Scannell said. "For years now, my customers have been gradually moving toward gardens with plants and flowers that prefer arid soil, more sun and less water. In addition to saving time and money, the homeowners are absolutely in love with the bright, colorful look of their new gardens."

One of those homeowners is Jeff Katz, who along with his wife Susan owns a home at Valencia Palms in Delray Beach. Two years after purchasing their house, they switched to xeriscaping. "The original landscaping in front of our home just didn't reflect the color and beauty that we wanted," Jeff said. "That's when we found out about Lesley Michael, a local landscaper who did a bunch of xeriscaped lawns in the area."

Jeff and Susan have absolutely no regrets. "Given the water restrictions in the area, it turned out to be a perfect choice," Jeff said. "Even our friends and neighbors comment on how beautiful it looks."

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