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DRY, BUT FAR FROM DESOLATE

Growing native and drought-tolerant plants saves money and water while celebrating Idaho's landscape

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Transforming a lawn into drought-tolerant plants and native perennials seems to come with two constants: Trial and error to figure out which plants are happy where and comments from neighbors who think you're crazy for getting rid of a perfectly good lawn.

Jennifer Miller works with the Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides. She began creating her xeric garden in East Boise in the fall of 2005. The process has been a long one of careful plant selection, investment in rock "hardscape," hand-watering plants as they were getting established and fielding those neighborly comments.

Her project began when she took a spade to her front lawn and began systematically turning it over to kill its roots, clump by clump. Now that her garden has had a few years to get established, it attracts more positive comments than negative, she said -- not to mention hummingbirds and butterflies.

And any kind of comment is easier to take if you consider this: A traditional bluegrass lawn requires 48 inches of water a year. A xeric garden requires 12 inches.

In her first year of xeric gardening, even with daily hand-watering of baby plants, Miller cut her water usage by 33 percent. Now that her plants are established with good root systems, she waters once a week and expects to save even more money and water.

LOCAL GARDENERS WITH WATER-WISE SENSIBILITIES OFFER 10 MORE BITS OF WISDOM

Marianne Konvalinka gardens in Boise's North End. Her favorite plants include lavender and Autumn Joy sedum. It's green all summer, then blooms pink in the fall.

One of the most striking flowers in her garden is a vivid yellow phlomis, or Jerusalem sage, ordered from High Country Gardens.

1. Know your dirt: Before you can grow any kind of garden, you have to know what you're digging into. University of Idaho Extension offers soil testing.

Also pay attention to soil texture. If you have clay soil, don't buy plants that require sandy soil.

2. Know what kind of gardener you are: Konvalinka isn't into garden maintenance. She knew that about herself and planted accordingly, focusing on tough plants like foxglove, fleabane, wooly thyme, Baptisia and buckwheat. Her hands-on gardening consists of cutting plants back and dividing them when they need it. She waters her garden once a month during the hottest season or whenever plants look "wilty."

3. Grow thirsty plants if you must, but be smart about it: Konvalinka's house came with a small lawn. She waters it deeply so long roots develop, but only every other week. Her husband mulches the grass, and they've both gotten over a desire for turf perfection.

"Don't think you need to have a golf course," Konvalinka said, "and don't worry about a few brown spots."

Group plants with similar water needs. If you have to have those beautiful but thirsty blue delphiniums, for example, plant them together for efficient watering.

Diane Jones runs Draggin' Wing Farm, which grows drought-hardy landscape plants for southern Idaho. She's a member of the Idaho Arid Gardening Alliance. Here are her tips:

4. Garden with a sense of place: Your home turf should reflect the landscape you actually live in. Lawn-based landscapes may be deep in our culture, but they're not natural for the sagebrush steppe we live in. Nor do they showcase Idaho's particular, distinct botanical beauty.

5. Xeric landscapes can be four-season landscapes: Concentrate on plant structure and textures. Several plants, including thyme, kinnickinnick and Davidson's penstemon, an Idaho native, are evergreen groundcovers.

Flowers are wonderful, Jones said, but they're "little bursts" of color. She encourages gardeners to think about larger plants that will have a presence during the dry, hot summer, and the frozen winter. Bitterbrush and sagebrush, for example, have interesting winter structures.

6. Children (and adults) love pathways: Jones has heard gardeners say they need their lawns because their kids need a place to play.

"One thing I love about landscaping is its ability to create special outdoor places to create a mood, little paths winding around larger plantings ... you can create a wonderful play environment for a child," Jones said.

Jennifer Miller, Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides, planted her water-wise garden in 2005 with a mix of native, and non-native drought-tolerant plants. Here are her tips:

7. Have a hands-on relationship with your garden: Having a xeric garden isn't like having a traditional lawn that you mow once a week then forget about. Perennial flowers change throughout the season. As different plants bloom, the focal point of your garden will change. Pay close attention to plants to make sure they're healthy, but also to enjoy their evolutions.

8. Start small: Grow a few xeric plants at first to familiarize yourself with them and see how they grow. You don't have to make the transformation overnight.

The same idea goes for getting rid of your lawn if you choose to till it by hand. Miller uprooted hers in half-hour sessions over a period of time so the project wasn't overwhelming. She chose this method because she wanted to keep the organic material from the dead grass in her soil. "Why take all that good compost to the landfill?" she said.

Once you're ready to plant, Miller recommends breaking your yard into small areas, possibly with paths. Pieces are more manageable and you can develop their xeric character in stages.

9. Don't crowd your plants: Perennials take awhile, sometimes years, to get established and grow to their full size. It's tempting to plant them close together to fill empty spots in your garden. Do this, and you'll just have to transplant them later to give them more room. Pay attention to spacing requirements and plant accordingly.

10. Native, xeric gardens bring variety: When Miller moved into her house, her yard had grass, a few rose bushes and three trees. Since focusing on native and xeric perennials, she has closer to 30 varieties. More variety attracts beneficial insects (she found aphid-devouring lady bug larvae for the first time this year). Growing perennial flowers also is easier than washing and refilling a hummingbird feeder each week.

"These [native and xeric] plants don't seem to have insect or disease problems, so no need for pesticides," Miller added.

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