

Xeriscaping can create beautiful yards



By Vernon Morning Star

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Their neighbours were aghast when they scraped away the front lawn and replaced it with 25 yards of sand, 25 yards of peat moss and a pile of big rocks, admits dietician and fibre artist Janet Armstrong, of Vernon.

It was 1992 and no one in the Okanagan had even heard of xeriscape.

Her partner, Lloyd Davies, is the passionate gardener. He explains, "Lawns take time, water and energy, so I wanted to look at alternatives. As a science guy, I recognize that we live in a semi-desert, so it just made sense.

"Anyway, flowers are prettier than lawn," they agree.

A retired Okanagan College biology professor, Davies grew up in Peachland so he knows how naturally dry the valley is, and is familiar with the drought-tolerant plants that grow on the hillsides — outside irrigated yards and farms.

In fact, some of those native plants, including Saskatoons, columbines, bitterroot, balsamroot, nodding onions, chocolate lilies, penstemons and a variety of grasses, have found their way into various corners of their colourful landscape, surrounding their renovated 1940s-era home.

Today, that xeriscaped front yard is a riot of lush growth and colour that they enjoy year-round from their verandah and windows. And, other than a little hand-watering in mid-summer, they never use the hose on it.

It's a different matter in their vegetable garden, but it has been built carefully and situated for maximum water retention and sunlight, and much of its moisture comes from rain barrels that catch runoff from the roof at each downspout.

Davies has also built a sturdy complex of compost boxes, filling them with yard and kitchen trimmings, and using the result to fertilize and mulch all his garden beds, conserving natural moisture around each plant in the process.

They planted a drought-tolerant lawn in the back that goes dormant in summer, staying green – but not growing or requiring water.

And for the few plants that require more water, like the hazelnut tree, dishwasher is used to supplement natural precipitation.

They've never put down landscape fabric and they use drip irrigation where they do water, avoiding overhead sprinkling to avoid evaporation and waste.

They're stellar examples of Okanagan residents who Make Water Work.

With 24 per cent of all Okanagan water used on household lawns and gardens, and less water available per person than anywhere in Canada, valley residents are encouraged to reduce outdoor water use this summer.

Take the pledge to Make Water Work at www.MakeWaterWork.ca and enter to win \$5,000 in WaterWise yard upgrades.

Take the pledge to:

Water plants. Not pavement.

Water between dusk and dawn.

Leave lawn 5-8 cm (2-3 inches) tall.

Leave grass clippings as mulch.

Top dress with compost; and

Change out some lawn for drought-tolerant turf and/or native and low-water variety plants.

Make Water Work is an initiative of the Okanagan Basin Water Board and its Okanagan WaterWise program.

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