

## MAKE WATER WORK: Xeriscape works for longtime gardener



By Vernon Morning Star

Published: **September 17, 2014 01:00 AM**

Updated: **September 16, 2014 03:293 PM**

**judie steeves**

*Special to The Morning Star*

Growing up in a family of gardeners, Gwen Steele had her own garden at the age of five, triggering a lifelong passion for growing things.

In 1992, working for Burnett's Garden Centre in Kelowna, customers would often ask which plants make water work best, growing in the Okanagan's hot summer sun with a minimum of water.

She took the queries to heart and began researching. Out of that research came a list which she carried in her pocket to answer questions at work, and a new term for gardening with nature — xeriscape.

"I have always loved helping people garden successfully. It connects you to the earth and feeds your spirit. The principles of xeriscape provide an easy guide to success," said Steel.

"Personally, I want to get the maximum benefit from my gardening time, so I use plants that do well without a lot

of care. A plant requiring extra care doesn't get to stay in my garden," she explains. "Also, I've always been keen on the environment and living in harmony with nature."

Although conserving water was not a consideration decades ago when the valley was less populated, she says, "I hated dragging hoses, so xeriscape suited me better for many reasons."

Another benefit of creating colourful gardens using plants that thrive under local conditions turned out to be their resistance to disease and insect pests.

"It's magical to watch an infestation of aphids disappear once the ladybugs move in," she notes.

For more than 20 years, Steele has continued her quest to learn which plants do best in our valley's challenging climate.

Her xeriscape research has included growing plants and recording how they grow, once established, with little more water than falls naturally during an Okanagan summer.

Today, she is executive director of the non-profit Okanagan Xeriscape Association (OXA).

The group offers workshops and has a website ([www.okanaganxeriscape.org](http://www.okanaganxeriscape.org)) rich with photos and details about plants and techniques for growing in the dry Okanagan. With support from the Okanagan Basin Water Board, the group also created the 'Un-H2O' xeriscape demonstration garden in front of Kelowna's H2O Fitness Centre.

One of the suggestions of the water board's Make Water Work program is to change-out at least a portion of the water-thirsty lawn surrounding our home or business with drought-tolerant turf and/or native and low-water variety plants. Alternatives include ground covers such as junipers or thyme; mulched shrubbery such as ninebark, potentilla, saskatoons and lilacs; ornamental grasses; or colourful perennials.

"Fall is an ideal time to plant," adds Steele, but cautions that it's important to group plants by their water needs. "Don't add a drought tolerant plant to a garden bed that contains plants requiring regular watering. Neither will be happy or healthy."

For more information on turf-removal and xeriscape, visit the OXA website or sign up for an upcoming workshop. Details at [www.okanaganxeriscape.org](http://www.okanaganxeriscape.org).

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. Learn more at [www.MakeWaterWork.ca](http://www.MakeWaterWork.ca).

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

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.vernonmorningstar.com/community/275360791.html>