OKANAGAN WATERWISE: Proper planting saves water

Audrey Wagner's two-year-old garden in Kelowna's South Slopes area, reclaimed from a patch of lawn.

Audrey Wagner photo

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With the warmer weather, many of us are already working in our yards, visiting garden centers, planning our gardens, and getting our lawnmower out. How we plant and what we plant can have a tremendous impact on how much water we use.

Did you know that about 24 per cent of the Okanagan's water is used on residential lawns and gardens? In fact, on average, Okanagan residents use more than two times more water than the average Canadian. Yet we have less available per person than almost anywhere in Canada.

While we often hear about global warming, it may be more appropriate to call it global weirding. Studies indicate that more rain and less snow, but at the wrong time for our growing season, and long hot summer droughts are going to become more common in the Okanagan. Of course, with drought comes more watering restrictions. It makes sense then to move to a less thirsty alternative to landscaping. Xeriscaping is the perfect solution.

When done properly, one can reduce outside water use by 30 to 100 per cent, depending on the landscape design and plants used.

Contrary to common perceptions of xeriscape as rocks with a few cactus or struggling plants, a xeriscape can be created in almost any style of landscaping, including a lush English country garden. Xeriscape involves gardening with the natural environment you live in to create a landscape that needs little or no supplemental water.

The seven principles of xeriscape include: appropriate planning and design, proper soil, ensuring lawn is only placed in practical areas, efficient and appropriate irrigation, correct plant selection, mulching, and timely maintenance.

In addition to saving water, there are many benefits to xeriscape. For example, a well-designed xeriscape can enhance the value of your home. During watering restrictions, xeriscape gardens thrive compared to conventional landscapes. And, over a 20-year period, a well-designed and maintained xeriscape can cost as little as 30 per cent of what it would cost to maintain a conventional lawn-based landscape.

Also, plants in a xeriscape are planted in their ideal conditions so they thrive and are much less vulnerable to pests and diseases. The need for pesticides can be eliminated. The need for chemical fertilizers can also be eliminated with the use of organic-type mulches (e.g. compost, manure) which fertilize at a slow even rate throughout the growing season and help create healthier soil. Plus, eliminating chemicals also protects your family's health, the environment and keeps toxic chemicals out of our drinking water.

For existing landscapes, start small. Immediate water savings can be achieved by covering bare soil with a five centimetre layer of organic mulch. Avoid rock mulch as it intensifies heat and is hard to weed.

Check irrigation systems for leaks, and adjust for weather and season. Water less often and observe how this affects your plants. Avoid watering during the day to reduce evaporation and avoid runoff.

Visit local xeriscape gardens for ideas:

• In the North Okanagan: Allan Brooks Nature Centre, Bishop Wild Bird Sanctuary, Xerindipity Garden;

• In the Central Okanagan: Okanagan Xeriscape Association's Un-H2O Garden in Kelowna;

• In the South Okanagan: Summerland Research Station's Xeriscape Garden, Penticton's Marina Way Park on Okanagan Lake, and Okanagan College campus' Native Plant Garden.

Check www.okanaganxeriscape.org for more on the seven principles of xeriscape, a landscape assessment tool to determine water use on your lawn and ideas to reduce it, a database of 400 water-wise plants for the Okanagan, and a listing of nurseries specializing in native or xeriscape plants. For more information, visit www.okwaterwise.ca.

Okanagan WaterWise is an initiative of the Okanagan Basin Water Board.