

Rocks are the new lawn

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
Friday, 10 June 2022 05:58



XERISCAPING, CITY rebates help property owners go with the (low) flow

With a steep water rate hike on the way and no end in sight for a punishing southwestern drought, now is a good time for Gallup property owners to rethink their landscaping.

Whether you decided long ago to give up on the lush, green lawn of the American Dream or are looking for a way to turn your dirt patch into curb appeal, xeriscaping may be your answer. The idea is to use pretty rocks and indigenous, low-water shrubbery instead of grass and thirstier plants.

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The city of Gallup offers a xeriscaping rebate program to offset the cost of tearing out turf and replacing it with a more sustainable alternative. Sadly, artificial turf doesn't qualify, and it's important to note that clearing a dirt lot or dead lawn won't qualify for a rebate.

"Sometimes I go out there and the grass is dead," Environmental Program Coordinator Elizabeth Barriga said. "That doesn't qualify because it's already saving water."

Xeriscaping rebates are available to home and business property owners. The program started in 2004 and about 50 to 100 people have taken advantage of it, Barriga said, noting it was more popular when the program started than in recent years.

Rebates – which come in the form of utility bill credits, not cash – are a drop in the bucket toward the total cost. Not everyone needed an incentive to make the switch.

Carl Granfors bought his home in 2015 and immediately replaced the turf in his front yard without a rebate. Five years later he got a rebate to help replace the grass in his backyard.

"In 2020 I knew the problem was real and I couldn't keep the grass," he said. Granfors replaced 262 sq. ft. of turf and got a \$65.50 credit against his water bill. He also bought a couple of rain barrels, which qualified for a separate rebate.

"It was more of a statement than for the rebate. [...] It was my message to the world that it's time," he said. "It was hard to give up the grass, but I couldn't keep it alive. It looked terrible and it was hard to keep up. I probably would have had to returf it."

Granfors has reduced water consumption with low-water plants, and he doesn't miss the hours spent keeping up a lawn.

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"I got the white rock. I have chemisa and Rocky Mountain juniper, Austrian copper coming up. It's a happy little world," he said. "I think the aesthetic is there. It's not grass, but it looks nice. I'm a proud conversion from grass to xeriscaping."

Cynthia Ferrari has similar feelings. She has much larger yards, and got a \$391 rebate for converting 1,556 sq. ft. of her property. She also did some of her conversion without a rebate, starting when she bought her home 20 years ago.

"I have a football stadium yard, both front and back," she said. "Most of my yard now is rock, with a few plants and bushes. I still have probably a 20-by-20 [foot] lawn. I have dogs. That's their little play area. Now when I water it I am very nervous and wonder if I should install artificial turf."

Ferrari also loves the reduced demands of a rockscape. "It was not a hard transition at all. There's some [climate] issues going on right now and it is expensive to water a lawn," she said.

It's possible to DIY a xeriscape, but both homeowners turned to Holiday Nursery to do their projects. Owner John Anthony Killgore dispenses advice as well as plants and products, and the nursery has crews for hire to do xeriscape projects. Be prepared to book in advance, especially in spring.

Getting Started

The first thing to remember about a xeriscape is that it's *low maintenance* and low water use, not maintenance or water-free. Property owners will still have to keep up on weeding, although less than with a turf landscape. Depending on which plants the owner chooses, watering should go from a couple of times a week to more like once or twice a month, Killgore said.

"Lots of times it has to do with decorative rocks in place of lawns. Less water all the way around, and types of plants that are more tolerant of low water," he said. "There's an assortment of stuff that you water very occasionally, like once a month."

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A xeriscape project often starts with weeding, especially for those who are turning a dirt patch into a rock garden. For those replacing lawns, it starts with turf removal. Either way, the goal is to clear the surface so it's essentially a blank canvas, and to clear as much as possible before using an herbicide.

"Don't just spray weeds that are six inches or a foot tall," Killgore said. Try to get most of the vegetation cleared before spraying.

Weed killers come in contact spray, which dries quickly and only kills what's above ground, and soil sterilants that will stay in the ground and prevent new plants from growing for a longer time after application. Those are suitable only for spaces that aren't getting replanted, like driveways.

An advantage of contact sprays is that they're generally pet safe after they dry, although it's important to check labels. "Most of those herbicides that you spray on shrubs, all they have to do is dry," Killgore said. "Just keep your pets inside or penned up [when you spray] and a couple of hours later you can release them with no issue."

Next is grading, usually two to three inches below the level of walkways or paving, to make way for rocks and pavers that will replace grass or bare dirt. The grade should be a gentle slope away from structures, so a 2-inch depth over most of the yard goes to about three inches deep alongside hardscape to prevent rocks from overflowing at the edges.

What could be simpler than rocks? Not so fast. Rocks come in a variety of sizes, colors and prices that range from about 75 cents to \$2 per square foot. Half-inch to 1-inch rocks are the most popular, but larger sizes are available and better for steeper grades, Killgore said.

Before rocks go down, put in whatever replacement plants the design calls for, usually low-water trees and shrubs. Then lay a weed barrier. That won't keep all weeds from popping up, but will slow them down and keep some varieties from coming back.

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If you're working in phases, a rockscape can be spot-cleared of rocks and cut through the weed barrier to add plants later. Raised planter beds on top are also a possibility, and easily added later.

"Raised gardening seems to be on the uptick. It's a viable option," Killgore said. "You know what's in the soil and you know what you're planting in that soil so it takes a lot of the guesswork out of what you're doing."

The state offers a free, downloadable *New Mexico's Enchanted Xeriscape Guide*(https://www.ose.state.nm.us/WUC/LearningXeriscape/XeriscapeGuide_ScreenResolution.pdf) with information on xeriscape design, plant selection and efficient irrigation.

For information about the city xeriscaping rebate application (downloadable)

[https://www.gallupnm.gov/DocumentCenter/View/48/Xeriscape-Rebate-Form?bidId =](https://www.gallupnm.gov/DocumentCenter/View/48/Xeriscape-Rebate-Form?bidId=)

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