



## Water Conserving Gardens

Colorado is a semi-arid state; the Front Range region receives a paltry average of fourteen inches of precipitation a year. Therefore, some garden plants that grow like gangbusters in other parts of the country are too thirsty to thrive here. Colorado gardeners can still grow beautiful and diverse gardens, however. Creative approaches to landscaping can cut residential lawn and garden water usage by 50 percent. During droughts, a waterwise garden will thrive and provide colorful habitat during an otherwise dusty, brown season.

**Choose plants appropriate for your local environment.** Long gone are the days when “xeriscape” meant a field of rocks and “zero” plant life. Native plants not only grow in our climate and soil, but also provide essential habitat for Colorado birds, butterflies, and bees. They also connect us with the land, cultivating a sense of place. More nurseries are starting to offer native plants, and local organizations offer seed or plant swaps on a regular basis. Many species can be grown by seed. However, not all Colorado plants are appropriate for local gardens; plants accustomed to the cooler, wetter zones of the mountains should be reserved for those microclimates.

A few xeric, native plants that grow well in home gardens:



Rabbitbrush



Little bluestem



Anise hyssop



Narrow-leaf coneflower



Rocky Mountain beardtongue

**Plant plants with similar water requirements together.** Hydrozoning is the grouping of plants according to the microclimates they thrive in. If you have a hot, dry spot, plant your most drought-tolerant perennials and shrubs there. Your thirstier annuals and vegetables should grow where water is most available. The first

year or two of a new garden will require deep, consistent watering. After the plants have successfully established, you'll be able to cut back on irrigation.

**Make responsible turf choices.** Homeowners can save much water, money, and gas by only keeping turf where it is most needed- a children's play area, for example. Other lawns can be replaced attractively and be even lower maintenance with groundcovers and shrubs. Where turf is necessary, drought-tolerant species such as blue grama and buffalograss are good bets.



**Install efficient irrigation.** There's no point to planting drought-tolerant perennials, if water is subsequently wasted through evaporation, leaks, and run-off. Homeowners should check regularly for leaks and faulty nozzles. Consider installing drip irrigation or even hand watering plants that only need supplemental water during their establishment periods. Keep water low to the ground and water at cooler times of day to reduce evaporation loss. Irrigation needs will also change with seasonal temperatures; plants will be less thirsty in spring and fall, and homeowners can reduce watering accordingly.



**Drought-tolerance begins with the soil.** Soil is the foundation of the landscape, but many gardeners grapple with Colorado's soils. Before planting any new gardens, it is a good idea to perform a soil test. The results will guide you in choosing the right plants and the right management techniques for your landscape.

Clay is slow to absorb water and slow to release water to nearby roots. Clay soil is also likely to be compacted, which impedes water absorption. Sandy or rocky soils drain quickly, which means that plants may not be able to hold on to the moisture they need.

Keep in mind that frequent disturbance, such as tilling, can expose valuable soil moisture to the air. By adding compost to the surface of the soil, the gardener improves the soil's ability to hold water in a useful manner and provides habitat for soil-dwelling invertebrates. Mulches, such as bark chips or decomposed granite, keep soil temperatures low, which slows drying.

**For more information about how you can garden sustainably, visit:**

<https://butterflies.org/pollinator-awareness-through-conservation-education/>