



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Xeriscaping Your Yard on a Budget (March 16, 2024)

by Kevin Northcraft, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener



Want to reduce water use for your lawn, help the environment, reduce maintenance time, and maintain a beautiful street view without costing you your firstborn? Consider subtracting high-maintenance planting in favor of low-water/low-maintenance plants.

Of course, that is not hard to do with an unlimited budget! But you are frugal; you want to do it on a budget. You can easily spend \$10-20,000 on a new sprinkler system, artificial grass, rock and gravel, and expensive new plantings. With commitment and time, you can probably convert your yard for less than \$1,000 and get exercise and education in the process! If you have youthful helpers, all the better!

The elements of success are design, implementation of lawn removal, plant selection, mulch or other ground cover, and maintenance. This article will look quickly at each to give you success. The good news is that low-maintenance plants love our valley!

Design

As Benjamin Franklin said, "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!" With this in mind, the first step is to decide what kind of low-water, low-maintenance yard you want. One good way to form an idea of the design you want is to watch for finished yards that you find attractive. Then, you can adapt to how you want to use your yard—for play, for sitting, etc.

You want the elements in your yard to be in scale, have a focal point, interesting color or foliage, have some repetition, and not be too complicated. Attractive yards can be as simple as five large blue agave plants or busy with 40 small plantings.

Many water frugal yards use mounds and a stream as a focal point. I used that and an antique goat cart to add an attraction, a palo verde tree for height, and rocks from area mountains to complete the design.

There are many sources for design help! One is a 52 page pdf file at cetrinity.ucanr.edu. Search for "Principles of Landscape Design".

Lawn Removal

I had an existing lawn that needed removal. I did it in stages, starting with the parkway (the area between the sidewalk and curb), then reducing the main lawn to an oval, and finally removing the remaining grass from the oval. This took a little more time than chemical or mechanical removal, but it was a money-saver to slowly do it myself! A sod-cutting machine can be rented to make the job much quicker, but it can be expensive.

The first step is to cut the lawn as low as possible and turn off irrigation, allowing the lawn to die (if it doesn't rain during this process). A rototiller can be used to chop up the sod, but I found a hula hoe worked well and was a great exercise. I worked for about an hour a day until I completed the yard.

If you are starting in the spring, our hot summers give you another option called solarization. Clear plastic sheeting is spread over the lawn and anchored down, allowing the sun's heat to kill the turf. This process can take 4-8 weeks.

Of course, herbicides labeled as weed and grass killers can be used. But they need to have repeated applications to completely kill all remnants of the turf. Read the label carefully and follow all instructions.

These methods are more detailed in a Master Gardener newspaper article, "Create a Water-Wise Yard." Go to ucanr.edu/sites/UC_master_gardeners. Then, search for "Create a Water-Wise Yard."



Plant Selection

Since you want to save money, look for plants on sale that fit your design. I found a lot of my cacti and other succulents on clearance at Lowe's and Walmart and kept them in their pots until the yard was ready to be planted. Be wary of cactus with a lot of spines if you plan to walk next to the plantings or have exuberant kids/grandkids!

The University of California system has a "Water Use Classification of Landscape Species" (WUCOLS) website to help you choose plants that are waterwise, suitable for our area, and the size and shape you desire. Go to <https://ceuh.ucdavis.edu/wucols>. You can either download the plant list or use the searchable database (recommended). To select plants suitable for Tulare-Kings Counties, select "Fresno" or "Clovis" in the "Select a city" dropdown box.

Mulch or ground covers

A wide variety of ground covers are available to keep weeds down between your plants. You can also put down a plastic tarp to reduce weeds, but many times, that ends up being exposed in an unpleasant way, i.e., it looks ugly! Our suggestion is to mulch, mulch, mulch! A 3-4" layer of organic mulch reduces water evaporation, protects roots from heat, and reduces weeds that compete for water. Download the pamphlet "Mulches for Landscapes" at <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/Details.aspx?itemNo=8672>.

Maintenance

While we are promoting "low maintenance," you still get the chance to spend some time in your garden! With well-draining soil, succulents and other drought-tolerant plants will thrive in our climate. You will have to trim dead leaves, shape plants to your liking, and check your irrigation system to make sure your low-water plants do get some water (especially in the first year, while they establish a strong root system).

Oh yes, pesky weeds will be forever with us, so plan on removing them weekly to avoid a buildup. With a thick layer of mulch, weeds are sparser and easier to hand-pull. It is advisable to consider adding to your mulch each year to maintain its beauty and function. Now, enjoy the beauty of your yard, watch for blooms, and chuckle while remembering all those years gone by when you mowed and trimmed incessantly!

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse North parking lot

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

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