
service in ACTION

Xeriscaping: garden flowers for low-water landscapes

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Quick Facts

Garden flowers provide a means for a showy, colorful display in a xeriscape.

Improve soils before planting most flowers.

Soil improvement is easier if only annual flowers are used for the first year or two.

Do not plant perennial garden flowers until soils are improved.

Plant flowers according to the exposure of the site.

Spring-flowering bulbs are drought-evaders and make good flowers for a xeriscape.

Soil Conditions

Before selecting garden flowers, check the condition of the soil. If it is a heavy clay, most flowers will do poorly due to lack of oxygen to their roots. Soils that are very sandy may have poor water-holding capacity and be low in available mineral elements. If either extreme is true, **do not plant perennial flowers the first year or two.** Improve the soil with sphagnum peat, available in bales or bags at garden centers. Incorporate a cubic foot of sphagnum per 8 by 10 foot area to a depth of 9 inches. Plant only annuals so it will be easier to cultivate and incorporate organic matter when the plants are killed by frost. Repeat additions of sphagnum until the soil is easily worked and does not compact. Perennial garden flowers may then be planted.

Garden flowers provide a means for showy, colorful displays to complement trees and shrubs in a xeriscape (pronounced zer-i-skap), a water-conserving landscape. Once an overall plan for your yard is made as suggested in Service in Action 7.228, *Water conservation through creative landscaping*, and the trees and shrubs are selected and planted as described in 7.229, *Xeriscaping: trees and shrubs for low-water landscapes*, you can add color with garden perennials and annuals. Such plans can be integrated with shrub borders and groupings of trees or they may be put in their own beds along fences, walls, walks and patios.

This information provided by:

1. Colorado State University Cooperative Extension landscape plants specialist and professor, horticulture. 9/92. ©Colorado State University Cooperative Extension. 1994. Prepared in cooperation with the Technical Advisory Committee for Xeriscape Front Range, an affiliate of the National Xeriscape Council, Inc. For more information, contact your county Cooperative Extension office.

Pay Attention to Garden Exposure

Select plants that are compatible with the exposure. If planting on north sides of structures or in with shrubs that might shade them, pick plants that will tolerate less sun than those thriving best in full sun. For example, garden perennials for a shaded spot might include canterbury bells (*Campanula*), primrose (*Primula*) and violets (*Viola*). Such plants usually need cool, more consistently moist soils than the vast majority of garden flowers. They can, nevertheless, be useful in the shaded parts of a xeriscape, especially if organic mulches such as wood chips are added to reduce watering frequency.

Rock Gardens

Rock gardens can be an attractive addition to a xeriscape garden. Put them in logical areas such as steep sunny slopes rather than mounds in the middle of a yard. Use care in installing the rock to achieve a natural look. Avoid the "rock pile look" or "garden of rock." For more information on rock gardens and the plants to use, refer to 7.401, *Rock gardens*.

Annuals

With some soil preparation and no more than one hand-watering a week, almost all annuals commonly sold

will do well in xeriscape gardens. For the hot, dry exposures, the most reliable include: marigolds, zinnias, cockscomb, sweet alyssum and bachelor's button. Where soils are shaded and cooler, use annuals such as lobelia, pansy and forget-me-not.

Bulbs

Most bulbs do best in full sun, but they must have well-drained soils. Spring-flowering bulbs are well-suited for xeriscape plantings because they are drought-evaders; that is, they grow in the cooler, more moist periods of spring and fall and lie dormant underground during the hot summer months. Use tulips, grape hyacinths, hyacinths, daffodils and crocus for naturalizing a xeriscape. In fall, scatter bulbs in the areas you want them and plant where they land. For more information on bulbs, refer to 7.410, *Flowers from fall-planted bulbs and corms*, and 7.411, *Flowers from spring-planted bulbs and corms*.

A Selection of Garden Flowers

Tables 1 and 2 give a selection of garden flowers, including some bulbs, that can be successfully integrated in a xeriscape planting. Table 1 lists perennials for shady spots, and Table 2 for sunny spots.

Table 1: Perennial Plants for Shady Spots

Plant name	Flower color	Flowering time	Height (feet)	Remarks
Anchusa (Italian Bugloss) <i>Anchusa azurea</i>	Deep blue	June-July	3 to 5	Tall accent.
Bleeding heart <i>Dicentra spectabilis</i>	Deep pink	April-June	1-1/2	Use with shrubs, north sides.
Candytuft <i>Iberis sempervirens</i>	White	April-June	1	Foliage evergreen.
Canterbury bells <i>Campanula medium</i>	Pink, purple, white	June-July	3	Tall accent.
Cardinal flower <i>Lobelia cardinalis</i>	Bright red	July-Sept.	2	Use in dense shade.
Columbine <i>Aquilegia spp.</i>	White, blue, pink, yellow	May-June	1 to 2	Use with shrubs.
Dragon head (false) <i>Physostegia virginiana</i>	Lavender, white	Aug.-Sept.	3 to 3-1/2	Aggressive creeper.
Gas plant <i>Dictamnus spp.</i>	White, pink	June-July	2 to 3	Use with shrubs.
Golden banner <i>Thermopsis divaricata</i>	Yellow	May	1 to 2	Aggressive creeper.
Harebell <i>Campanula spp.</i>	Blue, white	June-Oct.	1	Useful edging.
Monkshood <i>Aconitum napellus</i>	Purple	June-Sept.	3 to 4	Use in dense shade.
Pansy (tufted) <i>Viola cornuta</i>	Various	May-Sept.	1/2	Shade or sun.
Primrose <i>Primula spp.</i>	Yellow, red, blue	April-May	1/2	Showy spring flowers.
Violet <i>Viola odorata</i>	White, purple	April-May	1/2	Aggressive creeper.

Table 2: Perennials for Sunny Spots

Plant name	Flower color	Flowering time	Height (feet)	Remarks
Alyssum (golden) <i>Alyssum saxatile</i>	Yellow	April	1	Reseed readily.
Aster (New England) <i>Aster novae-angliae</i>	Purple, white	Sept.	3 to 5	Showy for fall.
Baby's breath <i>Gypsophila paniculata</i>	White	July-Sept.	2-1/2	Lacy, bush-like.
Beebalm <i>Monarda didyma</i>	Crimson	June-July	2 to 3	Best in mass plantings.
*Black-eyed susan <i>Rudbeckia hirta pulcherrima</i>	Yellow	July	2 to 3	Needs space.
*Blanket flower <i>Gaillardia aristata</i>	Red-orange	June-Sept.	2	One of the best for xeriscapes.
*Butterfly weed <i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	Orange	July-Aug.	1 to 1-1/2	Grows in poor soils; very deep-rooted.
*Butter & eggs <i>Linaria vulgaris</i>	Yellow	June-Aug.	1 to 1-1/2	Grows in poor soils.
*Cactus (various plant groups)	Various	May-Aug.	Various	Use in sandy soils.
*Coneflower <i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	Yellow, purple	Aug.-Sept.	4 to 6	For tall background.
*Coreopsis <i>Coreopsis lanceolata</i>	Yellow	June-Aug.	3	Easy to grow in most soils.
*Cornflower <i>Centaurea cyanus</i>	Blue, white	May-Sept.	2	Border plant, cut flower.
Daisy (painted) <i>Chrysanthemum coccineum</i>	White, pink	May-July	2 to 3	Showy, cut flower.
Daisy (shasta) <i>Chrysanthemum maximum</i>	White	July-Aug.	2 to 2-1/2	Useful with shrubs.
Daylily <i>Hemerocallis spp.</i>	Yellow, red, orange	June-July	2 to 2-1/2	Spreads to large clumps.
Delphinium <i>Delphinium elatum</i>	White, purple, blue	June-July	4 to 6	Tall accent; may need staking.
*Flax <i>Linum perenne</i>	Blue	May-Sept.	1-1/2	Almost shrub-like.
*Gayfeather <i>Liatris scariosa</i>	Lavender	July-Sept.	1 to 2	Showy in late summer.
*Golden glow <i>Rudbeckia laciniata hortensiana</i>	Yellow	July-Sept.	5 to 6	Tall, late summer flower.
*Hollyhock <i>Alcea rosea</i>	Various	June-Sept.	4 to 8	Tall accent; grows almost anywhere.
*Iris (bearded) <i>Iris germanica</i>	Various	May-June	1/2 to 3	Of easy culture.
*Lavender <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i>	Lavender	July-Aug.	1	Fragrant; shrub-like.
Lupine <i>Lupinus polyphyllus</i>	Various	June-Aug.	2-1/2 to 3	Good accent with shrubs.
Pansy (tufted) <i>Viola cornuta</i>	Various	May-Sept.	1/2	Shade or sun.

Plant name	Flower color	Flowering time	Height (feet)	Remarks
*Paperflower <i>Zinnia grandiflora</i>	Yellow	June-Sept.	1/2	Long-lasting bloom.
*Penstemon <i>Penstemon spp.</i>	Red, white, blue	June-July	2 to 3	Many varieties.
Peony <i>Paeonia officinalis</i>	White, pink, red	May-June	2 to 2-1/2	Tolerates some shade.
Phlox <i>Phlox paniculata</i>	White, lavender	May-July	1 to 1-1/2	Easy to grow.
*Poppy (iceland) <i>Papaver nudicaule</i>	Orange hues	April-June	1	Good edging plant.
*Poppy (oriental) <i>P. orientalis</i>	Orange, salmon, red	May-June	1-1/2 to 2	Aggressive creeper.
*Scabiosa <i>Scabiosa caucasica</i>	Lavender	May-Aug.	1 to 1-1/2	Fern-like foliage.
*Sedum (stonecrop) <i>Sedum spp.</i>	Various	May-Sept.	1/2 to 1	Many varieties; succulent foliage.
**Spurge (euphorbia) <i>Euphorbia spp.</i>	Yellow	April-May	1 to 2	Grows in poor soils.
*Sulphur flower <i>Eriogonum umbellatum</i>	Yellow	May-June	1/2	Grows in poor soils.
Sweet william <i>Dianthus barbatus</i>	White, pink, red	May	2	Aggressive biennial.
*Thrift <i>Armeria maritima</i>	Pink	May-Aug.	1	Grass-like foliage.
Veronica <i>Veronica spicata</i>	Purple	May-June	2 to 4	Aggressive creeper.
*Yarrow <i>Achillea spp.</i>	Yellow, white, pink	July-Sept.	1 to 3	Adapts to very poor soils; fern-like, aromatic foliage.
* Most drought-enduring.	** Caution. Avoid use of cypress spurge, <i>Euphorbia cyparissias</i> because of its tendency to escape into rangeland and hybridize with leafy spurge, a noxious weed.			