



Colorado MASTER GARDENER

Water-Wise Gardening: Hydrozoning no. 7.753

by D. Whiting, R. Tolan, B. Mecham, and M. Bauer¹

Outline. . .

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A principle of water-wise gardening is to select plants that are appropriate for our climate and group them according to their water needs. This grouping by water need is called **hydrozoning**.

Select Appropriate Plants

Colorado is a semi-arid climate. The plant palette for landscaping is limited without supplemental irrigation. On sites where routine irrigation is not desirable or practical, limit plant selection to species more tolerant of reduced to low irrigation.

A great reference on xeric plants for the high plains and Rocky Mountain regions is *Xeriscape Plant Guide*, by Denver Water, Fulcrum Publishing.

On sites where no landscape irrigation is desirable or possible, the plant palette will be rather limited, but not void of options. For example, in urban yards the small side yards are often put into low maintenance, non-irrigated mulched areas. In rural settings, it may be most practical to leave these non-irrigated areas in their natural state, and focus on landscaping a few key high use areas around the home, the entry, and the deck or patio areas.

Hydrozoning

Plants that require routine irrigation should be placed together. Plants tolerating less irrigation should be placed in another zone, where they receive less water. Plants that don't require supplemental irrigation (after becoming established) should be in yet another zone.

Possible scenarios vary depending on property size, irrigation options, and outcomes desired by the property owner.

For example, on a typical urban lot, high traffic areas (front home entry area, and patio and deck area) may be routinely irrigated zones. The front lawn in many urban homes is a routinely irrigated zone, while the back lawn may be reduced irrigation turf, and side yards may be non-irrigated. Another popular front yard scenario is a smaller irrigated front lawn that surrounds a larger reduced irrigation planting area with shrubs and perennials.

Studies on community acceptance about nontraditional landscape design identified a patch of mowed turf as a key component of alternative landscapes in a residential setting. Landscape designs with a naturalized, native or cottage garden effect were considered well maintained if the landscape had at least 10 percent mowed turf. The same basic designs without the turf were viewed by the community standards as weedy looking, uncared for, or neglected.

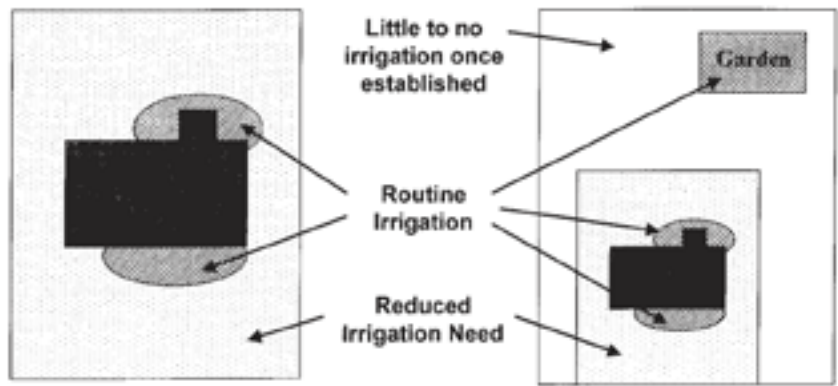


Figure 1. The objective of water-wise gardening is to group plants according to their water needs.

On lots with acreage there are many options. High use areas, such as the deck and patio, may be zones with routine irrigation. Larger lawn areas and perennial beds may be reduced irrigation zones. Another large block of land could be low or non-irrigated turf and non-turf options. The options can go on forever, but it all requires planning from the start!

Let's review a couple of points in this message:

- In Colorado's climate, the concept of low-water use plants is NOT a Phoenix, Arizona style rock and cacti garden. There is a broad selection of landscape plants that tolerate reduced irrigation. Many of these plants are native to the arid west. A great reference is *Xeriscape Plant Guide*, by Denver Water, Fulcrum Publishing. It is available at local bookstores.
- The objective of hydrozoning is to place low-water use plants together in areas or zones that actually receive reduced to no irrigation depending on water requirements. Placing low-water use plants in a zone that receives routine irrigation defeats the objective.
- Contrary to the belief of some novice gardeners, *xeric* plants require rain plus routine irrigation during establishment, typically for the first 1 to 3 years.
- Concepts of water conservation support *people space* with landscape zones that require routine irrigation based on the situation and tastes of the property owner. However, few families could justify an acre of high input, routinely watered Kentucky bluegrass as their *people space*.

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¹D. Whiting, Colorado State University, Cooperative Extension consumer horticulture specialist and Colorado Master Gardener coordinator; R. Tolan, Extension horticulture agent, Larimer County; B. Mecham, Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District; and M. Bauer, Eagle River Water and Sanitation District.

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