

# Low-Water Gardens (Xeriscaping)



*Each summer, we consume vast amounts of water in caring for our yards. In fact, some years Peterborough consumes twice as much water during the summer months, largely due to lawn and garden care. This places an enormous burden on our water treatment system. In rural areas, summer garden watering can drain wells and deplete groundwater supplies.*

The water we use in urban yards is purified to drinking standards, which requires expensive energy and chemicals. What a shame to pour our drinking water on our plants, especially when they would prefer rain water! There are many ways to use less water while still keeping a healthy and attractive yard. Low-water landscaping is called xeriscaping (pronounced ZEE-ruh-scaping). It is based on choosing plants which tolerate hot, dry weather, and learning how to make a little water go a long way.

## Conserving Water

### HUMUS

Soil that is rich in organic material (humus) acts like a sponge to soak up and retain moisture. Compost, peat and well-rotted manure are all excellent sources of humus. New gardens should have generous applications of humus before planting, and established gardens need frequent top-ups as humus eventually decomposes. Compost is available from the Ecology Park or large quantities can be ordered directly from the City of Peterborough's Waste Reduction Office at (705) 742-7777 ext. 1657.

### MULCH

Keeping bare soil covered helps to hold moisture, keeps roots cool, and reduces weed growth. After gardens are planted and weeded in spring, cover the soil with 2-3 inches of mulch. This should be done after a good rain, or a thorough watering, so that water is retained in the soil. Good materials for mulch include straw, leaves, wood chips, and bark chips. Several mulches are available from the Ecology Park or large quantities can also be ordered from the City of Peterborough or landscape companies.

### RAINWATER

Rain barrels or other containers positioned under a downspout are an effective way to collect rain for later use in your yard. Rain that falls during a thunderstorm can actually contain a natural nitrogen fertilizer! Food-grade rain barrels specially retrofitted to efficiently store rain water are available from Peterborough Green-Up.

### EFFICIENT WATERING

Following the suggestions on this factsheet will dramatically reduce the need to add extra water to your garden. However, watering may occasionally be necessary, especially when establishing new plants, or during periods of extreme drought. If you choose to water your yard, water deeply, early in the morning before the sun gets hot and causes the water to evaporate. Infrequent, deep watering is healthier for your plants than frequent shallow sprinkling, which only encourages roots to stay near the surface. Drip hoses, soaker hoses or buried irrigation lines will deliver water directly to the roots. Avoid using sprinklers which shoot water high into the air.

## Visit our Low-Water Garden

Visit the Low-Water Garden in Peterborough Green-Up's Ecology Park, located in the southeast corner of Beavermead Park on Ashburnham Drive. Sponsored by Peterborough Utilities, this garden will give you some beautiful ideas for your own low-water landscape. Visitors are welcome any time during the growing season. Call Peterborough Green-Up for further information.

## Selecting Low-Water Plants

Plants have evolved many tactics to prevent excessive loss of water. Some drought-tolerant plants have silver-coloured leaves which helps to reflect the sunlight and prevent overheating of the leaf. Other 'xeric' plants have hairy leaves which act as tiny parasols to partially shade the surface. Some plants have thick leaves with a tough, waxy coating, which reduces the evaporation of water through leaf pores.

Many grasses have developed extensive underground root systems which store precious moisture deep under the soil surface. In extreme heat, these grasses actually go dormant, turning brown above-ground. They save resources until the weather becomes cooler and wetter, when the grass will again turn green and begin to grow.

There are many hardy, drought-tolerant plants which are excellent for low-water gardens. Note: Plants native to southern Ontario are marked with an 'N'.

### PERENNIAL FLOWERS AND GROUND COVERS

- Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)<sup>N</sup>
- Bearded Iris (*Iris sp.*)
- Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*)<sup>N</sup>
- Blanketflower (*Gaillardia aristata*)
- Butterfly Milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)<sup>N</sup>
- Coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*, *C. verticillata*, *C. grandiflora*)<sup>N</sup>
- Grey-headed Coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*)<sup>N</sup>
- Hoary Vervain (*Verbena stricta*)<sup>N</sup>
- Hybrid Daylily (*Hemerocallis sp.*)  
Avoid common orange daylily – it is invasive
- Jacob's Needle (*Yucca filamentosa*)
- Lavender (*Lavendula sp.*)
- Wild Lupin (*Lupinus perennis*)<sup>N</sup>
- Pearly Everlasting (*Anaphalis margaritacea*)<sup>N</sup>
- Pinks (*Dianthus deltoides*)
- Prairie Smoke (*Geum triflorum*)<sup>N</sup>
- Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)<sup>N</sup>
- Sage (*Salvia officinalis*)
- Sedum (*Sedum sp.*)
- Thyme (*Thymus sp.*)
- White Beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*)<sup>N</sup>
- Woolly Lamb's Ears (*Stachys byzantina*)
- Yarrow (*Achillea sp.*)

### ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

- Big Bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*)<sup>N</sup>
- Blue Oat Grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*)
- Indian Grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*)<sup>N</sup>
- Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)<sup>N</sup>
- Side-oats Grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*)<sup>N</sup>
- Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*)<sup>N</sup>

### ANNUAL FLOWERS

- |                |                       |
|----------------|-----------------------|
| Alyssum        | Salvia                |
| Cleome         | Sunflower             |
| Cosmos         | Verbena 'Imagination' |
| Dahlberg Daisy | Zinnia angustifolia   |
| Nicotiana      |                       |

### SHRUBS

- Butterfly Bush (*Buddleia davidii*)
- Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*)<sup>N</sup>
- Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster sp.*)
- Creeping Juniper (*Juniperus horizontalis*)<sup>N</sup>
- Fragrant Sumac (*Rhus aromatica*)<sup>N</sup>
- Grey Dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*)<sup>N</sup>
- Ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*)<sup>N</sup>
- Potentilla (*Potentilla fruticosa*)<sup>N</sup>
- Red-leaf Rose (*Rosa rubrifolia*)
- Serviceberry (*Amelanchier sp.*)<sup>N</sup>
- Spirea 'Anthony Waterer' (*Spirea bumalda*)
- Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos alba*)<sup>N</sup>
- Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*)<sup>N</sup>
- Weigela (*Weigela florida*)

### TREES

- Bur Oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*)<sup>N</sup>
- Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*)<sup>N</sup>
- Green Ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*)<sup>N</sup>
- Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*)<sup>N</sup>
- Honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*)<sup>N</sup>
- White Ash (*Fraxinus americana*)<sup>N</sup>
- White Pine (*Pinus strobus*)<sup>N</sup>

### LAWNS

Lawn mixtures with a high percentage of fescue are naturally drought-tolerant in our region. Avoid grass blends with more than 25% Kentucky Bluegrass, as this tends to be a very thirsty type of grass. Try overseeding your lawn with white dutch clover which is reasonably drought-tolerant, and also helps to boost your lawn with nitrogen.