



Xeriscape Gardening in the Thompson–Okanagan

WHAT IS XERISCAPE?

Xeriscaping is a science-based, water-efficient approach to landscaping that reduces outdoor water use while supporting biodiversity, soil health, and long-term resilience. When properly designed and maintained, xeriscape gardens can reduce irrigation demands by up to 50 per cent compared to traditional lawns. Without sacrificing beauty or colour.

WHY XERISCAPE?

The Thompson–Okanagan region lies within a semi-arid rain shadow.

In Kamloops' hot, dry summers (average ~21.8 cm annual rain), outdoor residential water use is dominated by lawn irrigation. Municipal estimates show that a xeriscape garden often uses about 50 per cent or less of the water that a traditional lawn requires when designed with drought-tolerant plants and efficient irrigation.



* Sources:

Environment and Climate Change Canada: <https://climate.weather.gc.ca>

City of Kamloops: kamloops.ca

HOW TO XERISCAPE

Transitioning to a xeric landscape does not need to happen all at once. In fact, starting small is often the **most successful approach**.

Why start small?

- Builds confidence
- Reduces water use right away
- Allows you to test plant choices
- Spreads cost over time

Ways to start small

- ◆ **Convert One Lawn Strip**
 - Replace a narrow turf area (boulevard, fence line, side yard) with:

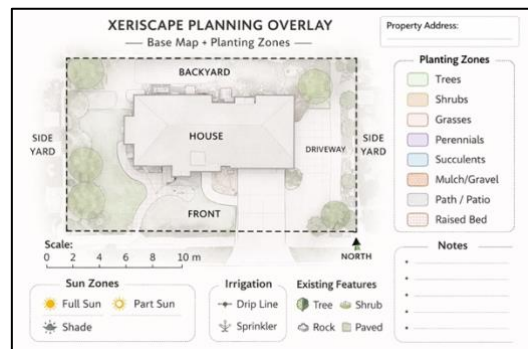
- Mulch
 - 3–5 drought-tolerant perennials
 - One structural shrub
- ◆ **Create a ‘Pilot Project’ Water-Wise Bed**
 - Remove a small section of lawn (e.g. 2x3 metres)
 - Install drip irrigation and group low-water plants together.
- ◆ **Reduce Turf to Functional Areas**
 - Ask: Do we use this lawn?
 - Keep play areas. Convert unused edges
- ◆ **Mulch First**
 - Add 5 to 8 cm (2 to 3 in) of coarse mulch to existing beds.
 - Mulch reduces evaporation and improves soil health.

7 PRINCIPLES OF XERISCAPE

1. Planning & Design

Effective xeriscape begins with **site assessment**. Evaluate sun exposure (particularly intense south-and west-facing areas), slope, drainage, soil type, and functional needs. Group plants according to water requirements (hydro-zoning). In the Thompson-Shuswap’s hot summers, thoughtful placement reduces stress and irrigation demand. Design for long-term maintenance and mature plant size.

[How to Create a Xeriscape Landscape Plan](#)



[How to Use Google Earth to Create a Landscape Plan Base Layer](#)



2. Soil Improvement

Many local soils are sandy, silty, or alkaline. Incorporating compost improves structure, microbial activity, and water retention. However, native plant areas should not be excessively amended, as many BC native species are adapted to lean soils. Healthy soil supports deep root growth and reduces water dependency.



BEFORE YOU AMEND SOIL

Provincial restoration and soil management guidance recommends maintaining existing mineral soil conditions when installing native species, unless soils are severely compacted or degraded.

Best practices include:

- ◆ Avoid routine fertilizer application for native plantings.
- ◆ Incorporate compost only when soil structure is poor or severely disturbed.
- ◆ Use light surface mulch (5–8 cm) rather than deep soil incorporation.
- ◆ Test soil before correcting perceived deficiencies.
- ◆ Match plants to existing soil conditions wherever possible.

The infographic features a blue background with white text. On the right side, there is a photograph of a silver metal bucket filled with dark brown soil, with a green-handled trowel resting inside it. Some soil has spilled onto the surface around the bucket.

3. Practical Turf Areas

Limit lawn to functional spaces such as play or gathering areas. Turf is often the highest water-use component of residential landscapes. Replacing unused lawn with climate-adapted plants significantly reduces irrigation needs.

[Lawn Removal Instructions](#)

4. Efficient Irrigation

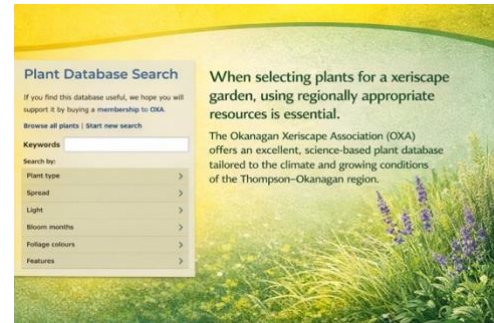
Drip irrigation delivers water directly to root zones with minimal evaporation loss. Water deeply but infrequently to encourage strong root systems. Even drought-tolerant plants require consistent moisture during their first one to two growing seasons to establish properly.

5. Appropriate Plant Selection

Select climate-adapted, non-invasive species suited to our hardiness zone and rainfall patterns. Incorporating native plants supports pollinators and local ecosystems. Always verify plants are not listed as invasive in British Columbia.

Suggested Plant Lists

- [Okanagan Xeriscape Association Plant Database](#)
- [Make Water Work Plant Collection](#)
- [Fire Resistant Plant Tool](#)
- [‘Grow Me Instead’ – Invasive Species Council of BC](#)
- [Native Plants of the Southern Interior – TSMG](#)

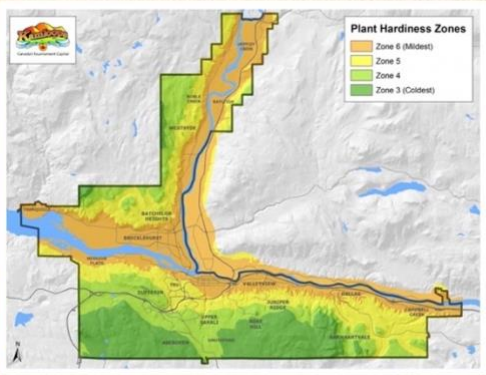


Select drought-tolerant plants that are **not** listed as invasive in British Columbia. Consult the [Invasive Species Council of BC](#) and local Thompson-Nicola invasive plant programs before purchasing unfamiliar species.

Plant Hardiness

Plant hardiness zones indicate a plant's ability to survive minimum winter temperatures. In Kamloops and the Thompson–Shuswap region, hardiness can range from approx.. **Zone 3 to Zone 6**, depending on elevation, slope exposure, and urban heat effects. This variability means that plant selection must account not only for drought tolerance, but also for winter survivability. Successful xeriscaping in Kamloops requires selecting plants that are both:

- Adapted to low summer moisture
- Hardy to Interior BC winter temperatures

A map of the Kamloops region showing different plant hardiness zones. The map is color-coded: Zone 6 (Mildest) is orange, Zone 5 is yellow, Zone 4 is light green, and Zone 3 (Coldest) is dark green. The map shows the city of Kamloops and the surrounding area, with the Thompson River and Shuswap River visible. A legend in the top right corner identifies the zones. The map also includes a north arrow and a scale bar.

[Kamloops Plant Hardiness Zone Map](#)

6. Mulching

Apply 5–8 cm (2-3 in) of organic or inorganic mulch to reduce evaporation, suppress weeds, and moderate soil temperature. Avoid installing **weed fabric** beneath mulch; it can impede soil health and root development over time.

7. Maintenance

Xeriscapes are lower maintenance, not no maintenance. Regular weeding, seasonal pruning, irrigation adjustment, and monitoring for invasive species are essential for long-term success.

**Source: Okanagan Xeriscape Association. (n.d.). Xeriscape plant database and design resources. okanaganxeriscape.org*

Water-Wise and Wildfire-Wise

Xeriscape principles align closely with **FireSmart BC** landscaping recommendations. Waterwise landscapes can be wildfire-resilient landscapes **when properly designed**.

- Reduce continuous fuel by spacing plants appropriately.
- Avoid dense, resinous shrubs near structures
- Maintain the 0–1.5 m zone around buildings using non-combustible materials.
- Remove dead material and ladder fuels regularly.
- Use gravel or stone mulch near foundations instead of fine bark mulch.

[FireSmart Begins at Home Guide](#)



Websites of Interest

BC FireSmart

Practical guidance for reducing wildfire risk through safer landscaping and home protection practices.

<https://firesmartbc.ca>

City of Kamloops – Xeriscape Resources

Provides local guidance and information for creating water-efficient landscapes in Kamloops.

<https://www.kamloops.ca>

Dr. Linda Chalker-Scott – Horticultural Myths (Washington State University Extension)

Science-based articles that debunk common gardening myths using peer-reviewed horticultural

research.

<https://puyallup.wsu.edu/lcs/>

Invasive Species Council of BC (ISCBC)

Works to prevent and manage invasive species through education, coordination, and provincial programs.

<https://bcinvasives.ca>

Okanagan Basin Water Board – Make Water Work

Encourages water conservation through drought-tolerant landscaping and responsible outdoor water use.

<https://www.makewaterwork.ca>

Okanagan Xeriscape Association (OXA)

Promotes water-wise gardening with regional plant resources, education, and a comprehensive plant database.

<https://www.okanaganxeriscape.org>

Thompson-Nicola Xeriscape Association (TNXA)

A local organization promoting sustainable, water-wise gardening across Kamloops and the Thompson-Nicola region.

Contact: tn.xeriscape@gmail.com

