

Planting Waterwise Landscapes

I recently listened to a radio talk show that discussed the psychological study of reminiscing, homesickness and nostalgia. An example used in the show was the history of home landscaping. When European settlers came to North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and got established and gained wealth, they used the same landscaping techniques and plants they were familiar with in Western Europe, in large part, to remind them of home.

The general style of landscaping included houses surrounded by lawn with many trees and shrubs planted on the peripheries of the lawn. This is still a dominant landscape style in much of the United States.

As North American culture has developed and become somewhat divergent, landscape styles have begun to shift somewhat from western European style. A great example of this is the American southwest. As cities were first established, it was very common for the new residents to have landscapes that required vast amounts of water to keep them green in the desert climate. As more people continued to move in, available water became limited and the landscape style had to change out of necessity. However, as a result, the style that developed mimics the natural beauty of the area, is very attractive, better supports the local ecosystem and uses little water. It has literally become a trademark of the region.

Currently, in many areas of the Intermountain West, a similar situation has developed where there is not enough water available to support our Western European style of landscaping, even though it is familiar. Many cities have begun restricting how water is used outdoors and charging much more money for it. Even in Cache Valley, many have had to change their landscape style to deal with this.

Being forced to do something is never pleasant. However, voluntarily changing attitudes or even at least being open to modifying our local landscape style can save homeowners a lot of time and money and will conserve local resources.

Unfortunately, it is often assumed that doing this means our yards will be planted with ugly, sagebrush-type plants. This is far from the truth. There are many beautiful plants readily available that are adapted to the local climate that should be used more. Even Kentucky bluegrass, which is often not considered a water-wise species, can be easily incorporated into a low-water use yard.

For those who have existing yards where minimizing water use was not a primary goal when they were planted, much can be done with little effort to save water and reduce the cost of needed fertilizer and chemicals. For more information about this, contact your local Extension office. Most information is available free of charge, and many low cost or free classes are taught in late winter on the topic. Additionally, USU Extension has a free comprehensive book available online at: <http://forestry.usu.edu/files/uploads/EC458.pdf> for those who are just getting started.