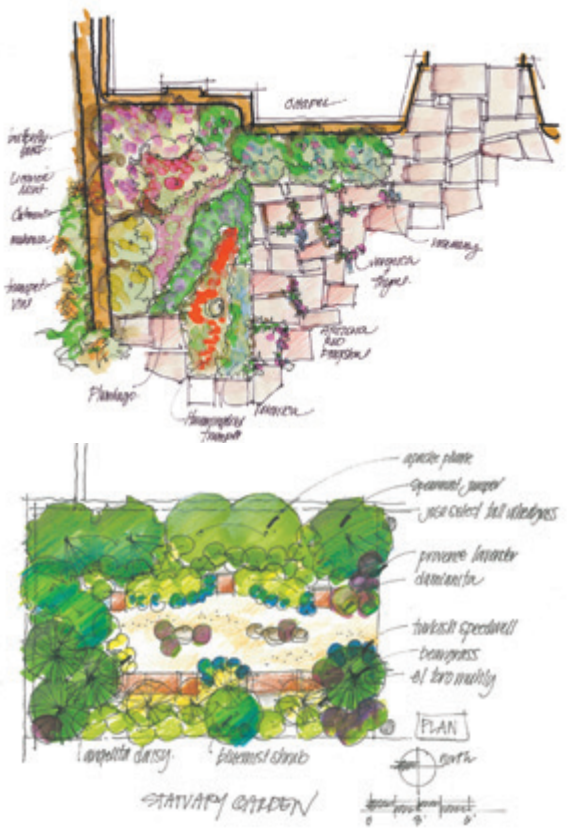
Don't Rock Your World – Create a Living Landscape



BY MIMI BURNS

As a community, the people of the Albuquerque metro area are good water conservationists who have reduced water use and water waste and have learned to treat water as a precious resource.

However, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. We have rocked our world to save water but in the process we have started to create a hotter, drier and unappealing city.

The water we saved locally by letting our trees die and removing landscaping is being used regionally to produce power to cool our homes. We need to create living, low water-use landscapes that shade our city, reduce our power needs for cooling, support local wildlife, minimize needs for herbicides, and encourage people to spend time outside where they can connect to each other and the natural environment.

Check out local resources before getting started. The Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority's website has xeric design templates, and High Country Gardens has useful articles for our high desert environment. And don't forget your local master gardeners.

Here are things to consider before creating your living landscape:

- Follow xeriscape principles for design, installation and maintenance.
- Aspire to a landscape that is 25- 50 percent evergreen for a great look year-round.
- Use lower water-use perennials and small areas of annuals for pops of color.
- Invest in an automated irrigation system with moisture sensors to protect your investment and reduce water use.

Improving your landscape can improve your well-being. To start, think about the things that are most important to you – shade, color, texture, fragrance, art. Also, consider activating your garden with birds and butterflies by including a bird feeder, a birdbath or a re-circulating fountain.

Tree, trees, trees

It's very likely that your favorite place to spend time outside has trees. In addition to providing shade and reducing the urban-heat island effect, trees provide habitat for wildlife, soften the urban landscape, provide comfortable places to hang out with family and friends, and help connect people to nature.

Trees are the most expensive piece of the landscape in terms of money and time, but they give back in so many ways. Properly placed trees can result in an energy savings of 20-50 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Reducing energy use saves water, because power stations are one of the biggest users of water in the nation. Additionally, properly placed and maintained trees can increase the resale value of your home by as much as 15 percent, according to the National Arbor Day Foundation.

Landscapes for well-being

Studies have shown that creating connections between people and the natural environment can have many benefits – from reducing needs for pain medications in hospitals, to improving human behavior in schools and public housing projects.

In New Mexico, garden spaces can be year-round amenities, which make them even more valuable. And gardens are not just for the backyard. A living landscape and a few chairs in the front yard will improve the appearance of your lot, your street and your neighborhood. You might even get to know your neighbors.

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Clockwise from top left: Aspens provide shade on the sunny side of this house, while pots with annuals and perennials provide color spring through fall; sketches show how landscape architects envision rock, gravel, stonework and tree and plantings working together to make open spaces both attractive and useful; plants are the focus of this front yard – not rock. A sculptural tree, colorful shrubs and long-blooming perennials fill the space and lead visitors to the front door. (Photos and sketches by Mimi Burns)