
Landscape Installation & Maintenance - Are the Rules Changing?

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In West Central Florida, if not throughout the state, due to the long-term nature and severity of the drought, the rules of landscape installation and maintenance seem to be changing. Several factors including the ever-tightening water restrictions, a prolonged drought and a tight labor market seem to be forcing property managers and landscape installation and maintenance contractors to re-evaluate current landscape practices.

The 'traditional' landscape design usually consists of lots of turf, trees, and ornamental shrub and flowerbeds, all under irrigation. This scenario works provided that labor is cheap and water is both plentiful and cheap. As labor becomes more expensive and water becomes either limited, or more expensive or both, the cost of maintaining a traditional landscape increases dramatically. The costs of landscape installation are up-front costs, payable all at once. Maintenance costs, while considerably lower, are never-ending. The result is that over time, maintenance costs can be 10, 20 or even 50 times the cost of installation. For this reason any reduction in monthly maintenance costs, multiplied over time, can be truly significant. What are the costs of maintaining a landscape? Labor, equipment, supplies such as fertilizers and chemicals, water and damage repairs. Following a severe drought, as we experienced this past spring, repair costs escalate. When the cost of repairs rises high enough, and the possibility of further damage in the near future exists, it may be time to completely re-evaluate the landscape design. If the damaged areas are replaced with identical species, will the newly installed plants die in the next drought? If that possibility is real, the money might be better spent on a landscape re-design that lowers water requirements and labor costs as much as possible. These changes would also reduce the damage and subsequent repairs. Horticultural experts have been suggesting similar changes for a number of years. Now, economic realities may force the issue. What re-design options exist? The use of different plants more tolerant of drought

conditions is the primary option. Replacing water-hungry St Augustine with drought-tolerant Bahia in low-profile areas is a viable option. When the Bahia is established, the irrigation can be reduced or eliminated. High-profile or high-use areas where St Augustine is deemed necessary, and worth the expense, can be maintained. St Augustine can also be replaced by other lower-maintenance groundcovers in some areas, often with an accompanying reduction in irrigation and maintenance costs.



Damaged ornamental beds can also be replaced with more drought-tolerant shrubs. Flowerbeds don't necessarily need to be eliminated. The Xeriscape concept of grouping plants by similar water needs is a horticulturally sound method of design. Usually high-profile areas include turf, shrubs and flowerbeds. If the irrigation system is updated to reflect the Xeriscape philosophy, the result is 'pockets' of higher maintenance plant material within the landscape. The bulk of the landscape, however, should be designed as a combination of drought-tolerant material, meaning it would only be irrigated in times of drought, and other plantings that, once established, simply do not need any irrigation. Another option for dealing with the changing conditions is converting traditional irrigation systems to micro-irrigation or drip systems.

Not every landscape firm is capable of designing or maintaining landscapes designed in the Xeriscape fashion. If your company is not presently capable of designing or maintaining properties such as those suggested, I suggest that your company and your employees require some training. The rules are changing.