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Gardenwise: Testing the Waters of Conservation

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One rain garden design.

By Susan Tito

By her own admission, a dear friend of mine has a black thumb. I would be hard-pressed to disagree with her, as most everything she plants quickly withers and dies.

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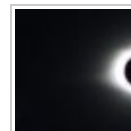
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In fact, one day I expect to see some tumbleweeds, a campfire and a harmonica-playing cowboy on her property.

It's easy to discern why her yard looks like the set of a Clint Eastwood Western: She forgets to water.

All joking aside, my friend is a role model when it comes to living a clean, green and indisputably serene life. And although it isn't pretty, her property — dare I say it? — exemplifies The Good, The Bad & The Ugly.

The Good: Although unintended, her yard meets two primary criteria as a xeriscape, which is a water-conserving landscape.

1. There isn't a drop of water wasted maintaining it
2. Some native plants (OK, weeds!) thrive there

As for The Bad & The Ugly: Did I mention that my friend has a black thumb?

Xeriscaping is a concept that's been around for decades, but it's especially relevant in this time of extreme weather. The "xeri" in xeriscape is derived from the Greek word "xeros," which means dry.

At first glance, it may seem odd to talk about the need for xeriscaping on Long Island, a region not particularly renowned for its sweeping desert vistas. But just because you don't see cacti outside your window doesn't mean that water conservation isn't a good thing.

"Even areas with adequate rainfall go through periods of drought, thus low-water-usage plants do better during those times," said Rex Bishop, director of technical education, at the National Association of Landscape Professionals (NALP), based in Herndon, Virginia.

There are many reasons to xeriscape your property. For starters, it's good for the environment.

Nationwide, landscape irrigation is estimated to account for nearly one-third of all residential water use, totaling more than 7 billion gallons per day, according to information posted on the Suffolk County Water Authority website. What's more, up to 50 percent of water used for irrigation is wasted due to evaporation, wind or runoff caused by overwatering.

"We are looking at serious problems with the Long Island aquifer," said

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Edwina Von Gal, founder/president of East Hampton-based Perfect Earth Project, a nonprofit that raises awareness about the dangers of landscape chemicals.

“Right now, irrigation demands are requiring that the Suffolk County Water Authority be able to meet peak irrigation needs, so if we reduce that, we ensure the life of our aquifer for much longer, because it’s in peril in some places,” she said.

For many environmentally conscious people, going xeric is a no-brainer, but some avid gardeners might be reluctant to embrace xeriscaping because of restrictions on what should be planted.

If you think you have to forgo lovely blooms for a barren rockscape, think again. With proper planning, you can grow a beautiful garden that does not require supplemental water.

Going xeric isn’t an all or nothing proposition — try it out in a small area of your property or roll it out in stages. Still on the fence? Consider the cost savings.

“It’s all about your pocketbook,” said Ms. Von Gal, who is also a landscape designer. “Very simply, by reducing water use, we will either maintain or reduce the cost of water.”

The key is to use native plants. “If you give a plant the soil and surroundings to which it’s accustomed, it’s going to do well,” Ms. VonGal said.

One xeric solution is to install a rain garden — a shallow, landscaped area that acts as a basin to absorb clean rainwater and collect storm-water runoff.


Sustainable Long Island, a nonprofit organization in Farmingdale, which among other endeavors promotes the sustainable use of resources, has teamed up with communities across Long Island to install rain gardens. The Peconic Estuary Program is also working on similar initiatives.

“If planted correctly, a rain garden only requires a small amount of weeding to sustain itself,” said Gabrielle Lindau, director of communications and development at Sustainable Long Island.

As for plant choices, there’s a range of native grasses and perennials that will beautify your property and provide a habitat for beneficial insects and birds. The Long Island Rain Gardens website features a native plant database that

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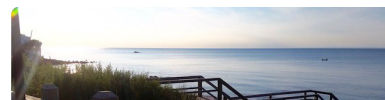
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There's a proverb that states: "You never miss the water till the well runs dry." But with a properly planned xeric garden, you'll never miss the water. Period.

Susan Tito is a freelance writer and proprietor of Summerland Garden Design and Consulting. She earned a certificate in ornamental garden design from the New York Botanical Garden and is a member of the American Horticultural Society. She can be reached at stito630@gmail.com.

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