

Xeriscaping Living Laboratories in the Dakotas and Montana

Contrasts in North Dakota

Atop a hill in Bismarck, ND, a tale of two landscape choices visually illustrates why xeriscaping, the use of native or drought tolerant plants in landscaping, is not only easier to maintain, it's far more beautiful to look at as well.

The contrast is striking.



Common landscape:
non-native plants, constant mowing, sickly plants

Xeriscaped landscape:
native plants, no mowing, lush plants

On one slope of this hill overlooking the Missouri River valley the landscaping is a more commonly used mix of low-to-medium-maintenance-introduced or non-native plant species often used in new building projects throughout the country. Simply put, the slope looks sick and because the plants have not taken too well to their new environment, they are not covering the hill sufficiently enough to prevent erosion. Added to this sickly salad of very unhappy plants is the constant mowing needed to give it a manicured look which only exacerbates erosion issues.

However, on the other slope consisting of native plants, which need little to no maintenance, the vision is graceful with lush grasses fluttering in the wind and bright wildflowers of purple and yellows. The onlooker is almost

transported back to a time when an unhampered mother nature knew what plants worked and looked best. And most importantly, there are no erosion issues—lawn mowers need not apply—as no mowing is needed. So why doesn't everybody 'go native' with their landscaping needs?

Lack of awareness is one of the main reasons why according to Dwight Tober, plant materials specialist for North Dakota.

“The contrasting native and non-native site is located just below a middle school and it was a project developed by the biology teachers of the school,” said Tober. “In fact, the teachers referred to the project as their ‘Outdoor Laboratory’ and made certain that grasses and flora from North Dakota were planted to ensure that this outdoor laboratory would be an example of the Great Plains as they once were throughout the region.”

For more info: <http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/ndpmc>

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Montana in the Mix

Meanwhile, just next door in Montana, workers at the Bridger PMC are equally as involved in xeriscape landscaping with drought tolerant and native plants as their neighboring PMC in Bismarck. The Bridger PMC first established demonstration plots in 1998 with nine different native plants and introduced grasses. Like the Bismarck example of visually demonstrating a stark contrast of landscaping choices, employees at the Bridger PMC mow half their plots and leave the other half untouched to clearly show what these plots of native plants look like in non-manicured conditions.

Being somewhat of a living outdoor laboratory, the Bridger PMC conducts experiments including driving vehicles over the plots to monitor the impact of trampling. To bring greater awareness to native plant xeriscaping, in 2001, the Bridger PMC published, in cooperation with several other entities including the Montana Association of Conservation Districts, a 15 page brochure entitled 'Creating Native Landscapes in the Northern Great Plains and Rocky Mountains' (see link below). Free of charge, and now in its fourth printing, the brochure has been distributed to about 48,000 copies to those interested in xeriscaping.

Additionally, through the Foundation Seed program, the PMC is supporting a graduate student from Montana State University who is looking at water use efficiency of 13 native grass species and 12 mixtures comparing them to Kentucky bluegrass along a supplemental water gradient.



Xeriscaping in Montana: non-manicured versus mowed plots

The Bridger PMC staff has been giving xeriscaping workshops to Master Gardeners, Conservation Districts, Montana Nurseryman's Association, and Cooperative Extension Service. The PMC also help establish xeriscape demonstration plots at the County Fairgrounds in Worland, WY and Thermopolis, WY.

For more info: <http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/mtpmc>

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From the Field

Los Lunas Plant Materials Center Hosts Landscape Architects

On August 19, the New Mexico Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) visited the Los Lunas Plant Materials Center (PMC).



ASLA visitors to Los Lunas PMC learn about 'Autumn Amber' Skunkbush Sumac during August 19 tour of the facility

About 10 landscape architects toured the Center for three hours. David Dreesen, an agronomist at the Los Lunas PMC said the PMC staff concentrated on showing the landscape architects the PMC's native grass seed fields so they could observe the potential use of mass plantings of native grasses in xeriscapes for aesthetic as well as conservation purposes.

For more info: <http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/nmpmc>

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Fun Stuff: Take a tour of the Internet Archives Website (<http://www.archive.org>) and type the National Plant Materials Center's URL (<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>) into their 'Way Back Machine'. Chances are, every major update of the Website (or any other Web site you select) will be there for lots of memory recall fun. It's very intriguing and somewhat addicting so have some fun and use it as a research tool in the future!

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