

# Five Steps to a New Water Efficient Garden<sup>1</sup>

Steve Chaney, Texas Cooperative Extension, Tarrant County

It's that time of the year and if you're having trouble deciding on a New Year's resolution, you might consider turning your old landscape into a new one that conserves water. We had lots of rain this year, which makes it easy to forget about the previous years of drought. But more will come. So why not start the New Year off with some simple, yet effective conservation ideas?



**STEP ONE:** The first step of a successful garden is planning and the winter is the best time to get your ideas on paper. Find a nice day; go out and really look at your yard. Note where the grass is weak. Where is the shade? Where is the sun? Do you have enough room for the things you want or are there areas that you don't like anymore? Ask yourself where your private area is; where your service area is; where your family area is?

To properly plan, you must first ask all of these questions and try to find the answers. You may have additional questions depending on your location and needs. Take a moment and write the questions and the appropriate answers down so you will remember; you will need them for the next few steps.

**STEP TWO:** The second step is to take a soil sample in each of the areas that you want to improve - sod, garden, flower beds, trees, etc. You can get a soil sample kit at your local Extension Service office. Simply follow the directions and you will receive a comprehensive analysis back in 10-12 days.

The health of your soil and the type of your soil will make the difference between a successful landscape and one that struggles forever. So many of our soils are high pH clays

which have a very small amount of organic material. Lack of organic material contributes to minimal nutrient levels as well as to a minimal water holding capacity. In most cases, the simple addition of well finished plant derived compost is all our soils need.

**STEP THREE:** The third step is choosing plants suited for your area, perhaps even your particular neighborhood. If you're new to an area, take some time to look at the local homes and see what grows well. Consult your local Extension office and Native Plant Society for plants that thrive in your soil type with minimal maintenance and water. The Texas Smartscape Web site ([txsmartscape.com](http://txsmartscape.com)) is a great resource for selecting plants that work in North Texas.

With a little care and time you can plan a plant palette that will give you all the colors and texture you could ever want with minimal water usage. Wouldn't it be nice to have plants that bloom or have foliage color year round; plants that you rarely have to water or fertilize?

**STEP FOUR:** The fourth step is to choose the most efficient irrigation system for your landscape. In several of our arid western states, they no longer allow water to be sprayed in the air. Conventional spray-heads are being replaced with drip irrigation systems, which use minimal amounts of water while maximizing efficiency in our landscape.

It is increasingly easy to convert an irrigation system to a drip system, with simple household skills and tools in your garage. You can find qualified help on-line or at many of your local nurseries. All you have to do is ask.

**STEP FIVE:** The fifth and last step is to mulch, mulch and mulch. The use of a well chosen natural mulch has been found to be our best slow release fertilizer. The addition of 3-inches of mulch to your beds will help reduce the soil temperature, reduce weed seed germination, and improve soil moisture retention, as well as provide the slow release fertilization we could all use in our landscapes.

It takes lots of planning and forethought to make a great water conserving landscape, but it's essential. The success of your garden depends on it!

