



The 20 Best Xeriscape Plants for Colorado

by Matt Corrian

I often get asked to recommend Xeriscape plants for Colorado landscapes. This is a difficult task because there are so many to choose from, and I would hate to limit anyone's palette to a limited number. After all, it is the variety in color, textures, and form that makes Xeriscaping so attractive.

That being said, I do think a small list can be helpful to people who are new to the area, or are not familiar with the available plant choices and may be overwhelmed by a catalog of thousands of plants. Although this is a Colorado list, most of these plants can be used in many places throughout the world depending on the local climate.

- **Fernbush** – *Chamaebatiaria millefolium* Fernbush is a medium sized shrub with interesting fern-like leaves that persist throughout the winter. This shrub requires little water or maintenance, and produces clusters of small white flowers in the late spring through early summer.



- **Agastache** – *Agastache ssp.* Agastache, or hummingbird mint, is a fragrant group of colorful perennial herbs that is available in many colors mostly ranging from orange to pink. The plants are covered with beautiful tubular flowers from mid-summer to fall. Hummingbirds absolutely love these plants.
- **Panchito Manzanita** – *Arctostaphylos x coloradoensis 'Panchito'* Panchito Manzanita is a low growing woody shrub with shiny, oval, dark green leaves that persist throughout the winter. It gets small, pale pink flowers followed by small red berries- but its best characteristics are the evergreen foliage and the

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fact that it requires little care or water. For more info read my [previous post dedicated to this plant](#).

- **Yarrow** – *Achillea* *ssp.* Yarrow is a group of Rocky Mountain native perennials that are available in many colors, ranging from yellow, to white, to red. The plants are very drought tolerant, requiring almost no watering once established. Fern-like, finely dissected leaves form clumps at the base of the plant, often naturalizing and spreading. Flowers are produced on stiff, tall stalks throughout the summer.



- **Spanish Gold Broom** – *Cytisus purgans* ‘Spanish Gold’ Spanish Gold Broom is a medium sized deciduous shrub that is native to the Mediterranean. In late spring it is covered with small yellow pea-like blossoms. This shrub grows in a mounding, cascading form of bright green stems that remain green throughout the winter. The small leaves drop by mid-summer.
- **Catmint** – *Nepeta* *ssp.* Catmint is a widely used mint that produces an abundance of blue flowers. The reasons that I like this plant are first, that it is one of the earlier Xeriscape perennials to emerge in the spring to form an attractive clump of blue-green foliage, and second, that it flowers all summer long and requires zero maintenance.
- **Iceplant** – *Delosperma* *ssp.* The Iceplant that we use in Colorado is a perennial that is native to the higher elevations of South Africa. Note that this is not the invasive Iceplant that is a problem in Southern California. Delospermas form a ground-hugging mat of succulent leaves that range from grey to green. The plants are coated with shiny, delicate flowers in colors from red, to purple, to pink, often with different colored centers. One of my favorite plants.



- **Blue Avena Grass** – *Helictotrichon sempervirens* Blue Avena Grass is a striking addition to any landscape. Large clumps of blue-gray leaves give this grass a unique texture and contrast among other plants. In mid-summer a large group of tan seedheads gracefully arch from the plant and stand out from the blue foliage. Like most grasses, Blue Avena requires little maintenance or supplemental watering.
- **Penstemon** – *Penstemon* *ssp.* Penstemon is another group of Rocky Mountain native perennials that requires little watering once established, preferring well drained soils. Penstemons are available in just about every color. These plants

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are small in size which makes them ideal for filling in between other Xeriscape plants. They provide an abundance of colorful blooms that attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

- **Mojave Sage** – *Salvia pachyphylla* Mojave Sage is a large shrubby perennial that produces an abundance of striking purplish-blue flowers throughout the summer. The silver-green foliage really stands out too, growing up to 3 feet tall, and persisting as a semi-evergreen throughout the winter.
- **Prairie Winecups** – *Callirhoe involucrata* Prairie Winecups is a Colorado native perennial that grows in a low mound of trailing stems covered in round dark-green leaves. The plant produces a large number of cup shaped wine-red colored flowers from late spring through summer. Because this is a native plant it is well adapted to our local climate and requires little maintenance.
- **Mexican Feather Grass** – *Nassella tenuissima* Mexican Feather Grass has a fine, hair-like form that gives this grass a texture like none other. Early in the summer the fine tufts of grass are bright green, then they fade to a striking golden yellow in the mid summer through the fall and winter. The way that this grass moves in the breeze brings a graceful movement to the landscape.



- **Torch Lilly** – *Kniphofia ssp.* Torch Lillies are interesting because of their unique foliage and flowers. The foliage is grass-like, and grows in thick clumps ranging in color from blue-green to dark green. The flowers are produced in a tight bunch on tall spikes, and the flowers open from the bottom of the spike upwards.
- **Crimson Pygmy Barberry** – *Berberis thunbergii 'Crimson Pygmy'* Crimson Pygmy Barberry is a compact deciduous shrub with small red leaves and stems. The red color makes an excellent contrast with the tan and blue hues of the late summer Xeriscape. This shrub is easy to care for, and maintains a very compact and dense form.
- **Agave** – *Agave ssp.* Agave is native to the Southwestern United States and Mexico, and it thrives in hot, dry locations. Most of the Agave's have beautiful thick blue foliage with spines on the tips of the leaves. A very low maintenance plant for dry southern and western exposures.



- **Prairie Coneflower** – *Ratibida ssp.* Prairie Coneflower is a tall, vigorously growing perennial that requires little maintenance and produces flowers

throughout the summer. The foliage is bright green, and available flower colors include yellow with dark brown centers, and burgundy red with dark brown centers. The seeds are easy to harvest and sow the following spring.

- **Creeping Western Sand Cherry** – *Prunus besseyi* ‘*Pawnee Buttes*’ Creeping Western Sand Cherry is the low growing form of Western Sand Cherry that is native to the Rocky Mountains. The plant has bright green leaves, and produces fragrant white flowers in the spring, followed by small black fruit that attract birds and wildlife. In the fall, the leaves turn to beautiful shades of burgundy and red.
- **Coral Bells** – *Heuchera* *ssp.* Coral Bells are a widely used favorite because they are easy to grow and care for. The large leaves are available in a variety of hues from light green, to burgundy, to silvery green. Coral Bells does very well in shade to partial sun. Available flower colors range from white to red, and are produced on slender stalks in late spring to early summer.
- **Yucca** – *Yucca* *ssp.* Yuccas are native to the Southwestern United States and Mexico. There are many different varieties to choose from with various forms of stiff sword-like leaves ranging from dark green to blue-green. Yuccas are a true evergreen that brings form and structure to the landscape year-round. Most Yuccas produce large showy spikes of white bell shaped flowers in mid summer.



- **Apache Plume** – *Fallugia paradoxa* Apache Plume is large native deciduous shrub with whitish stems and branches covered with small light green leaves. Some of the leaves persist throughout the winter. The shrub produces single white flowers in mid summer, followed by the very unique and attractive rose and pink colored plumes that give this plant its name. A very unique and versatile shrub that grows vigorously in its native habitat of Colorado.

The Criteria for this List:

– This list is for the Front Range of Colorado. We are somewhere in the middle of zone 4 to 5 on the [USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map](#). I will plan to follow up with a separate post for the mountain areas located above about 7,000 feet in elevation.

– I have only included plants that are very easy to care for, and have excluded plants that require a lot of water since that is a key component of Xeriscape. The “best” plants, in my opinion, are those that are well adapted to the local climate and do not require much additional water and maintenance. Of course there are occasions where the use of higher water-use plants is desirable, such as in drainage areas, however I have left them off of this particular list. And if this were a list of my personal “favorite” plants then I would probably include some that require a little extra care.

- I am not a botanist- I am a landscape architect. This means that I am far from an expert on the science and anatomy of plants. Instead, I am influenced by characteristics such as: how the plant works in an overall design, its adaptability to a variety of sites, the colors and form of the foliage, the availability and cost of the plants, etc.

- This list includes a good mixture of evergreen and deciduous shrubs, perennials, and ornamental grasses that will provide a variety of color, texture, and interest throughout each of the seasons. I have excluded trees, bulbs, and annuals for the purpose of this list. There are so many of each to chose from that I will provide future lists for each category.

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26 Comments



Katie Whitehead on May 14, 2011 at 11:30 am

This is a insane post. I'm really happy to have found this! I cannot wait to let my family know about this.



Amy on June 4, 2011 at 11:29 pm

Thanks, great information!



Jim on July 3, 2011 at 1:00 pm

Great info! Do you have the list for above 7000'





available? Please send to me. Thanks much.



Matt Corrion on July 8, 2011 at 9:07 am

Reply

Jim,

Glad you like it! I am working on putting a list together for above 7,000 feet, please stay tuned... There are definitely some different issues and challenges that come with the higher elevation.



Matt Corrion on December 13, 2011 at 4:20 pm

Reply

The high altitude plan list is done! See it here: <http://www.lot-lines.com/the-best-plants-for-high-altitude-landscaping>



Matt Corrion on February 22, 2012 at 10:20 am

Reply

If you like this article, check out my new post on the "10 Best Evergreen Xeriscape Plants for Colorado": <http://www.lot-lines.com/the-10-best-evergreen-xeriscape-plants-for-colorado>



delicia cruz on March 18, 2012 at 10:09 pm

Reply

perfect i am landscaping a 7,000 foot high mountain cabin need all the help i can get im a city gal and totally clueless your website is perfect appreciate any other xerscaping perennials in front of a log cabin thxs have a margarita day thxs



Nicolette Toussaint on April 17, 2012 at 2:20 pm

Reply

This is wonderful. I'm on the Western Slope, in Carbondale. I'm busy tearing out the lawn of the place I bought last fall, and replacing it with something OTHER than lawn and junipers. (Oh, such monotony.) You have given me a palette!

Thank you so much.



Sandy on April 25, 2012 at 10:12 pm

Love this list! Which of these, or other recommended xeriscape plants, will do well in small shady yard in the front range (Boulder city)? It's time to rip up the sod and I'd love a combination of ground covers and perennials that are low maintenance and require little water and little sun (under ash trees mostly). Ready to exchange my home for 4 months with someone to live in it and transform the yard, in case someone is interested!

Reply



Matt Corrion on April 25, 2012 at 10:46 pm

Hi Sandy,
How do you intend to irrigate the new plants? (I would suggest drip irrigation). A couple great plants for your situation would be Oregon Grape Holly and Coral Bells. Would you like to discuss having me do a design for you? You can contact me at mcorrion@odgdesign.com Thanks for your question!

Reply



Joan on July 23, 2012 at 7:57 pm

Just found your wonderful site! I'm located in New Jersey and would like to send my brother and his family something (perennial) to plant. They live in Pine, Colorado. Do you ship? If not, could you make a recommendation? I would want to send it in December.

Thanks so much!
Joan

Reply



Matt Corrion on July 23, 2012 at 11:04 pm

Reply



Hi Joan,
Thanks for reading and commenting. We don't ship any plants- I would recommend High Country Gardens, they ship everywhere. You might also try getting them a gift certificate to Timberline Gardens here in Arvada, I don't think they ship many things, but it would be a great nursery for your brother to visit. Good luck, Pine is beautiful, I hope you get to visit once in while!



Deb on March 28, 2013 at 6:35 pm

I live at 9000 feet in Colorado. What are some of the best plants to use for this area

Reply



Matt Corrion on March 29, 2013 at 8:53 am

Deb,
Please see my post on the best plants for high altitude:
<http://www.lot-lines.com/the-best-plants-for-high-altitude-landscaping>
Also, in the comments stream below that post you will see some answers I've provided to similar questions. Thanks for commenting, I hope this helps out.

Reply



Sharron on June 28, 2013 at 12:30 pm

How much would it cost to have you plan a xeriscape for me?

Reply



Matt Corrion on July 8, 2013 at 9:39 am

Sharron – please email me at: info@odgdesign.com and I can send you more info. Thanks!

Reply



Jerry on August 15, 2013 at 11:34 am

How do blue agave (native in Tucson) do in Colorado Springs. do I need to protect in the winter? How would you suggest.
Thanks

Reply



Matt Corrion on August 16, 2013 at 6:56 am

I think it will be too cold unless you are able to move them inside in the winter. I would stick to Agave parryi, Agave neomexicana, or Agave havardiana. They grow slower in colder climates, so you may want to plant them as large as possible if you can find larger ones.

Reply



Adrienne on February 25, 2015 at 1:00 pm

Matt, I love the high altitude lists. I am a CA, LA and NC Landscape Architect working on a project in Salida, CO and I didn't see any tall evergreens. Can you recommend any? We need to screen a lot!

Reply



Matt Corrion on March 1, 2015 at 5:29 pm

Hi Adrienne,
Yes unfortunately the evergreen choices are a little limited. You have the pines varieties that like dryer conditions and can be kept a little narrower, then of course you have the native Junipers (but if you visit this post you'll see the strong emotions that those stir):

We did also do a post on the 10 best Evergreen Xeriscape Plants:

Would love to hear more about your project. Are you working with someone who is licensed in CO? I'm actually looking for someone licensed in CA to assist us on a

Reply

large project in SoCal. Feel free to email me at (mcorrion AT odgdesign dot com) and maybe we can exchange more info or I can give you more info on the Colorado plants.



Todd Rutherford on April 17, 2015 at 10:40 am

Reply

Adrienne- I'm not sure how tall, or how narrow of evergreens you need, but a great choice for screening are the upright junipers, specifically the upright varieties of *Juniperus scopulorum*. These junipers can range in height from 12 feet to 30 feet depending on which variety. If you need more height, you might want to choose some of the pines such as *Pinus aristata*, *Pinus edulis*, *Pinus flexilis*, *Pinus nigra* and *Pinus ponderosa*. Just keep in mind that these are all wider than the upright junipers. The pines I mentioned range in height from 20 feet to 60 feet tall.



leah slator on March 1, 2015 at 9:20 am

Just wanted to say thanks from Taos, NM

Reply



Matt Corrion on March 1, 2015 at 5:16 pm

Reply

Thank you, I always enjoy visiting Taos!



Jing Ying on March 10, 2015 at 8:37 am

Thank you Matt, This is just what our family needed to xeriscape the front yard.

Reply



Ann Seanor on May 17, 2015 at 12:24 pm

Reply



RE: Spanish golden bloom: when I looked for this shrub at a local nursery, I was told that they do not survive the winters in the Denver area. Is there a subspecies that you are aware of that does well in this area?



Matt Corrion on May 18, 2015 at 4:46 pm

Reply

Spanish Gold Broom is the broom that you want. It will survive our winters and I have had one in my yard in Arvada for 6+ years. There is another broom sold at some of the big box stores called "Lena Broom" (can't recall the scientific name off the top of my head), but it isn't hardy enough to survive Colorado winters. Another good plant with a similar look that you could try is Bluestem Joint Fir (*Ephedera equisetina*).

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1. [The Best Plants for High Altitude Landscaping | Lot Lines](#) - [...] getting great feedback on my 20 Best Xeriscape Plants for Colorado post, which included a few follow-up requests, I have decided...
2. [Outdoor spaces, xeriscaping in Colorado Springs? Custom Homes](#) - [...] or are looking for ways to incorporate xeriscaping into your outdoor spaces take a look at The 20 Best Xeriscape...
3. [Looking for Xeriscaping ideas - Trees, Grass, Lawn, Flowers, Irrigation, Landscaping... - City-Data Forum](#) - [...] snow, high altitude and low humidity and not the best soil conditions. Examples of sites I found: The...
4. [20 More Great Xeriscape Plants for Colorado | Lot Lines](#) - [...] wanted to revisit Matt's post on the 20 Best Xeriscape Plants for Colorado, and add to his list of...
5. [Colorado Xeriscape for Home Owners - SE Denver Homes](#) - [...] yarrow help to take up a large area of the yard, while surviving on limited water. Here are some other...