

# Wildly Appealing

Drought gives seed to xeriscaping

WRITTEN BY ALLISON WALSH • PHOTOS BY T.J. CETZ

Native water garden at  
the Greenville Upstate  
Forever headquarters.

**CARLTON OWEN WAS HAPPILY ENSCONCED IN SIMPSONVILLE IN THE LATE 1990S WHEN HE AND HIS WIFE REALIZED THEIR NEST WOULD SOON BE EMPTY.**

Around the same time, Owen was engaged in discussions with his fellow Upstate Forever board members about ways they as individuals could walk the talk and model the conservation organization's philosophy in their own lives. This perfect storm swept the Owens into downtown Greenville and out of the suburban landscaping mold.

"We said we would step forward and build, at our expense, a home that would showcase examples of sustainable living in both the house and the land," Owen explains.

The couple purchased two lots on Pettigru Street – one that had been cleared by a house fire, and its neighbor, that happened to be the last remaining undeveloped lot in the Pettigru Historic District. They built their eco-minded home on the first lot, and set about dedicating the adjacent lot to native plants.

"We wanted to create an Upstate woodland garden, using plants that would be consistent with a little forested zone in this area," Owen says.



The practice of using primarily native plants in a landscape with an eye toward reducing water consumption is known as xeriscaping, literally "dry landscaping". Whether your priority is cutting costs or saving the Earth, water conservation is a cause we can all get behind, and xeriscaping, also referred to as "smart gardening," is a winner on both fronts.

Sprawling expanses of lawn punctuated by sweeping beds filled with annual color are verboten, but gardeners choosing this way of life aren't forced to cultivate an affinity for cactus

and rocks, either. In the middle of these two extremes are a surprising number of native trees, shrubs, flowering plants and grasses that have spent generations adapting to and thriving in our climate.

"We will have more droughts in this area," Owen says. "And the likelihood of a native plant surviving a drought versus an ornamental is much greater."

A wildlife biologist by trade, Owen runs the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities. This background gave him a leg up when it came to planning his landscape, but he also consulted with Rick Huffman, native plant specialist and principal and founder of Earth Design Inc.

Huffman's company routinely works with homeowners looking to go native as well as on commercial and public properties. Roughly 20 percent of his business is focused on restoration ecology, such as creating wetlands and restoring streams.

For those looking to do it themselves, Clemson University has positioned itself as a resource for the community on the principles of xeriscaping. They have even devoted a portion of the South Carolina Botanical Garden to the Van Blaricom Xeriscape Garden, also known as the Smart Garden. The area provides visitors a living example





of drought-resistant gardening, with a small plot of grass surrounded by low-water plants grouped according to their irrigation needs.

“We wanted to show homeowners how to use these ecologically sound, time-saving, cost-saving gardening

techniques,” says Todd Steadman, Associate Director of the SC Botanical Garden.

The university has also made available a wealth of online information through its Home and Garden Information Center. It is here ([www.clemson.edu/extension/](http://www.clemson.edu/extension/)

hgic) that residential gardeners can find information on the basic principles of and appropriate plant species for xeriscaping.

### PLAN IT OUT

Huffman says the key to achieving an environmentally efficient »

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landscape is taking stock of what sort of natural irrigation your personal plot provides, and grouping plants according to their water needs. This means not planting annuals that need constant attention in the midst of more hardy, drought-resistant plants.

"It doesn't mean you can't have water-loving plants," he says. "But you want to put them in areas that are going to be wet."

Think about those areas of your yard that always seem to be a little soggy or where the gutters overflow during a heavy rain, and use those spots for those petunias you can't live without.

### TAKE A PASS ON THE GRASS

The Owens' Pettigru yard is shady and hot – not the ideal conditions for growing lush, green grass. So, they didn't.

"We have no yard and no grass. We're trying to let things fill in – sort of an English garden look," Owen says. "That's another maintenance and cost item we've eliminated."

Steadman points out the ecological impact, stating that 40 to 50 percent of municipal water use goes toward irrigation, and 70 percent of that is for lawns. There is also the energy and resources necessary to filter, deliver and purify all of that water.

You can still have the traditional Southern curb appeal of a lush lawn, but it doesn't need to – and shouldn't – be the lead player in your landscape.

### DO THE DIRTY WORK

Once you have your design down, the next step is to build up your soil.

"Healthier soil holds on to water longer and releases it as plants need it," Steadman explains, adding that leaf mold has become the primary source of fertilizer – and red clay buster – used at the SC Botanical Garden.

Steadman and his staff have built a mountain of leaves with the bounty they receive from the city of Clemson's

residential collection, but homeowners can achieve the same effect by raking leaves from their yard into an out of the way pile and leaving them to fester until spring. When you see steam rising off the mound you'll know good things are happening.

### MAKE GOOD CHOICES

Huffman, who was native when native wasn't cool, is also the founder of the South Carolina Native Plant Society ([www.scnps.org](http://www.scnps.org)), another great resource for the home gardener. The organization's web site ([www.scnps.org](http://www.scnps.org)) provides information on plants that are becoming increasingly popular for their resistance to dry conditions, ease of maintenance, and the wildlife they attract.

Another important element of native gardening is avoiding – or eliminating – invasive non-natives. One of Owen's biggest challenges has been battling the leafy interlopers vying for prime real estate in his yard – bamboo, wisteria, and, of course, kudzu.

Huffman says these plants, along with liriopse, English ivy, Chinese privet, and maidenhair grass, are dangerous because they quickly become dominant and choke out native plants.

"There is often a native alternative that fits the design," Huffman says, pointing out that replacing the ever popular Leyland cypress along your property line with Eastern red cedar brings the added benefit of attracting bluebirds.

### WATER WISELY

"Knowing how and when to use irrigation is key," Steadman says. "Water needs are greater during the first year or two when plants are establishing their root systems and then reduce over time."

Rather than throwing caution – and most of your water – to the wind with traditional spray sprinkler systems, Steadman recommends consulting your local garden supply center for help in making the switch to drip or mist irrigation.

### COVER UP

The importance of using mulch around trees and shrubs and in flower beds cannot be understated. »

## NATIVE SELECTIONS

### PERENNIALS

#### Ferns

Christmas Fern  
Cinnamon Fern  
Lady Fern  
Southern Shield

#### Shade

Foamflower  
Spiderwort  
Trillium  
Wild Geranium  
Wild Ginger  
Woodland Phlox

#### Sun

Aster  
Coreopsis  
Echinacea Purpurea  
(Purple Coneflower)  
Gaura

Joe Pye Weed

Phlox

Rudbeckia  
(Black-eyed Susan)

Stokes Aster

### GRASSES

#### Meadow Grasses (not for lawn usage):

Bluestem  
Indian Grass  
Muhlenbergia  
Panicum (Switch Grass)

#### Woodland area grass:

Chasminthium  
(Northern Sea  
Oat Grass)

#### Lawn Grass:

Danthonia (Silky  
Oat Grass)

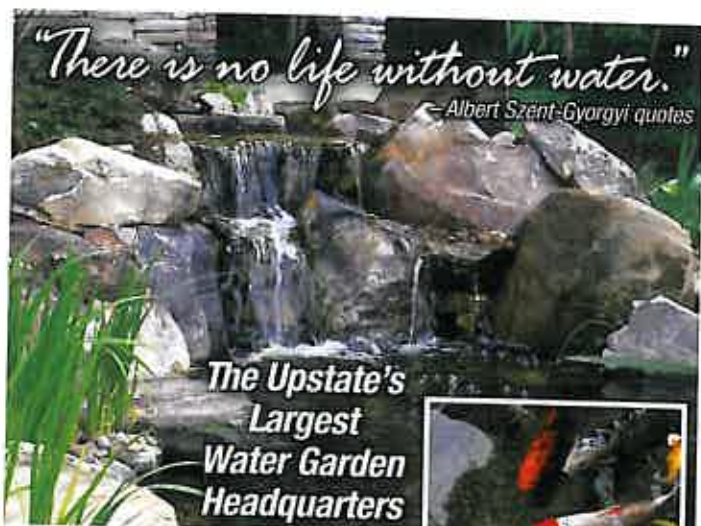
### SHRUBS

Beautyberry  
Clethra (sweet  
pepper)  
deciduous Azalea  
Eastern Red Cedar  
Hypericum  
(St. Johnswort)  
Oak Leaf Hydrangea  
Virginia Sweetspire

### TREES

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American Holly  
Fringe Tree  
Red Maple  
Sourwood

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— Albert Szent-Gyorgyi quotes



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As in the case of healthy soil, a protective layer of mulch – leaf mold works here, too – keeps plants from getting hot under the collar in hot, dry conditions.

### LET THEM KNOW YOU CARE

When it comes to maintenance of your new native landscape, Steadman refers to an old adage: 'The best fertilizer for a garden is the gardener's footprints.

"Pay attention – remove pests and disease by hand," he says. "You can eliminate most problems by early detection."

In gardening, as in life, showing up is half the battle. 🌱



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