

GARDENING

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Xeriscaping can spruce up sidewalk strip

For many of us, this is scorched-earth territory — you know, that little strip of dirt between the sidewalk and the street. Even in the best of summers, it's tough to keep this little patch wet enough to grow grass, and in broilers like last year, it is often the first area to perish. Texas Master Gardener Robert Beyer offers these tips for those pondering what to do with the "nuisance strip" in his blog Gardening in Central Texas.

This is public easement territory, but homeowners are expected to maintain it. Keeping St. Augustine or other turf grasses green and looking well along this public walkway requires watering and fertilizing. There is no system (automated or manual) that can water this narrow strip without wasteful runoff into the gutter and eventually into our creeks and lakes. Pesticides and chemical fertilizers applied in this narrow strip can run off along with the wasted water and pollute natural waterways.

There is an easy solution to this that provides attractive curb appeal and avoids environmental contamination and waste of limited water resources. It's xeriscaping the nuisance strip: tearing out the turf grass and replacing it with self-sufficient plantings that can sustain themselves in any weather without supplemental watering, pesticides or fertilizers. In place of grass, packed decomposed granite, gravel or hardwood mulch can keep weeds at bay.

If your homeowners association or authority doesn't allow this, it's time to hammer hard for change. Avery Ranch in Northwest Austin recently did just this, adopting a set of guidelines that permit approval of xeriscaping not only in the nuisance strip area, but in front yards as well.

This doesn't mean you can plant a "wildscape" or anything, anywhere, but the Avery Ranch policy is an example of a team effort between homeowners and the homeowners association to help Austin get more environmentally friendly.

The benefits to the hom-



Robert Beyer

Low-growing, water-thrifty plants make the best of a challenging situation in the strip between the sidewalk and street.

owner are significant in cost savings, less maintenance and living within the constraints of and respecting our Central Texas environment.

Common sense should prevail when designing a "nuisance strip" landscape.

- Avoid plants with thorns, spines or toxicity.

- Choose only plants that are 2 feet to 3 feet high or less for visual safety.

- Only use hardscape elements (rocks, driftwood or other décor) that are less than a foot tall.

- Use only plants that are native or adapted to the local environment, and avoid sprawling or rapidly growing plants to reduce maintenance.

- Choose plants that will provide year-round curb appeal (mix evergreen plants with perennials that go dormant in winter).

- Know your soil conditions (drainage and composition) and choose adaptable plants.

Your "strip" should be compatible with your front yard landscape as well. Remember, what you create, you must maintain. Also, you must comply with city regulations that ensure safety on public-access areas.

Some suggested plants to consider that are evergreen and deer-resistant and require full sun and little water include Santolina (green and silver varieties), pink skullcap,

Hesperaloe (red yucca), Mexican feather grass, bulbine, blackfoot daisy, Calylophus, creeping rosemary, bush or creeping germander, dwarf Eleagnus pungens and evergreen sages (e.g. cherry sage). Certain soft-leaved yuccas may be used as well, such as Yucca filamentosa.

Start with evergreens with winter appeal, then expand into perennials, which are dormant in winter but can be planted to add to summer color. Be imaginative. For example, we used a super dwarf crepe myrtle "Chickasaw" that never gets more than 2 feet tall as a foundation plant. It is deciduous, so a supporting cast of evergreen plants are needed for winter appeal. Many dwarf varieties of plants are being introduced every year that might be suitable for this area.

Beautifying the strip between the sidewalk and curb benefits both the homeowner and neighbors who will have something much more beautiful than a carpet of grass and weeds to look at — in addition to setting an example of how we can be more environmentally responsible for the little pieces of land we control.

If you agree, time to get digging.

Robert Beyer became a Texas Master Gardener in 2001 and writes about gardening and horticulture at centraltexasgardening.blogspot.com.