

Top 10 Landscape Bad Practices

Like the late night comedy shows, I'll start the count down with number 10 of what I consider landscape bad practices that I've seen in High Desert. Following each practice is context and why I think it's a bad practice.

10 Removing leaves and other plant debris after winter.

Plant debris is organic material and makes great mulch which both moderates soil temperatures and helps hold in moisture. Leaving or crushing plant debris returns the nutrients taken up by the plant back to the soil. Leaves hold minerals in particular, so by removing them soil over time contains fewer minerals. To address the lack of minerals you have to add them back through soil amendments.

9 Placing plants too close together.

Plant labels include the diameter at maturity. When plants are placed inside this diameter, over time they grow together. At some point some of plants will need to be removed. The longer you wait the more expensive this gets. Landscapers plant too closely so the initial landscape looks fuller. Instead of planting more perennials, fill in the holes with annuals each year until the holes go away.

8 Leaving irrigation settings unchanged.

Irrigation frequency is usually set for summer plant installation and to keep the plants alive. Once your plants take hold, the frequency can be reduced. Also as we change seasons from summer to fall less water is needed. The same for spring, less water is needed. For winter you need to run the system on warm days with no frost that night. If your system is watering during freezes, the valves can crack. Leaving the setting untouched consistently overwaters in spring, fall, and winter. Note too that xeric plants after the third year need less water. With overwatering some xeric plants like chamisa and apache plume grow huge and woody.

7 Trimming ornamental grasses at the wrong time of year or cutting them too high.

Trimming ornamental grasses in the fall removes the seed heads which provide food to birds and other wildlife and provides interest (color and movement) over winter. Cutting them means you don't get to enjoy the look over winter. The grass stems also help insulate the crown from freezes. Cutting them too high leaves a stubble and makes it more difficult for the new grass to break through. The stubble is dead. New grass comes from the roots of the crown. Trim ornamental grasses in the early spring if they are cool season grasses or April if they are warm season grasses.

6 Pruning a multi-trunked tree into a single trunked tree or limbing trees up too high.

Not all trees are multi-trunked, but those that like to grow that way should be left that way - examples include Desert Willow, Vitex or Chaste Tree, Crape Myrtle, Gambel oak, and New Mexico Olive. The NM Olive can be limbed up about a foot, just enough to see the suckers and allow them to be removed. Conifers should not be limbed up. Dead branches can be removed. Note that if a tree doesn't need a branch, the branch will die off, so let the tree make the decision about what needs to be removed!

5 Placing plants that grow large where they don't have enough space at maturity.

I see examples of this everywhere. It makes me think that no one reads the label before planting. Recently I've noticed apache plumes being planted in the hell strip between the sidewalk and the street. These plants will need constant pruning over their life because there just isn't enough space there.

In the Estate villages I see shrubs hanging out into the street where they are sometimes truck or car pruned. If a plant is placed where there's enough room for the mature size, it looks better, survives more, and costs less to maintain over the life of the plant (less pruning). Why pay for pruning that you don't need to do? The mature size of many plants can be found in the back of the ABCWUA Xeriscaping Guide or on the Internet. Be sure to consider height (watch out for power lines), depth (utilities), as well as width (walls, house, driveway, walkways).

4 Pruning using a hedge trimmer creating boxes, balls, lollipops and cupcakes.

Using electric tools makes shearing plants too easy and too fast. Unfortunately, shearing also creates weak new growth from the cut point. Once plants are turned into boxes, balls, lollipops, and cupcakes they all look alike. You can't tell what they are any more so why have multiple plants in your landscape if they all look the same? The only plants that like shearing are ones that get browsed by wildlife in nature. These include potentilla, snakeweed, and winterfat.

3 Changing the grade level (up or down) on existing trees/shrubs.

On slopes one of the favorite things to do is create terraces. This is not a problem for landscapes without existing vegetation. If there is existing vegetation, this exposes roots (grade down) or suffocates the plant (grade up). Plants need oxygen, so don't bury the roots with crusher fines, soil, or gravel. A reasonable amount of mulch is no more than 4 inches and not piled up on the trunk.

2 Planting trees too deeply.

The test of a plant that was put in too deeply is to grab the main trunk and wiggle it back and forth. If the plant moves noticeably, it was planted too deep causing slow growth and sometimes death. Many potted plants are already too deep in the pot since the potting soil has sunk during watering causing the plant to drop and the soil at the pot edge to rise. Make sure all plants have the topmost roots near the soil surface and don't dig a hole too deep – wider is better than deeper.

1 Topping trees or shrubs. Leaving dead or diseased trees in place.

Topping makes trees look ugly, removes leaves which are the food factory, and causes weak regrowth. There is a lot of topping done on trees and shrubs on the common property of High Desert by residents wanting to preserve their views. In addition, topping of common property trees and shrubs ruins the look, reduces their "asset value", and is illegal. Dead/diseased trees are not an attractive look and should be removed.