



Turning a dead zone into a living landscape

XERISCAPING PROJECT

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This area faces south-southwest, receiving reflected heat nearly all day from the street before it. Previously, we seeded with Bermuda grass, thinking that was tough enough to survive. Finally, a thermometer survey found that the sunny area near the street is at least 12° hotter than the shade beneath the Pecans just 20 feet away. This means that this area tops 120° during the summer.

WHAT IS XERISCAPING?

Texas A&M says that in summer, up to 60% of household water may be used to maintain landscapes. Xeriscaping is landscaping that uses heat and drought tolerant plants that consume less resources while maintaining attractiveness. These plants need not be cacti and succulents.

The foreground and Pecan beds highlight our older theme of brick edging around landscape elements. This time, we decided to be as natural as possible, using local rocks for edging and design elements.



IN THE BEGINNING: SOIL AND ROCKS

This area gets hammered by heat. At midday on October 16, 2011, the temperature under the Pecans was 78°, but in the shade behind the rock pile in the center of this picture, it was 94°, sixteen degrees hotter. Bad for grass, but good for cacti and succulents.



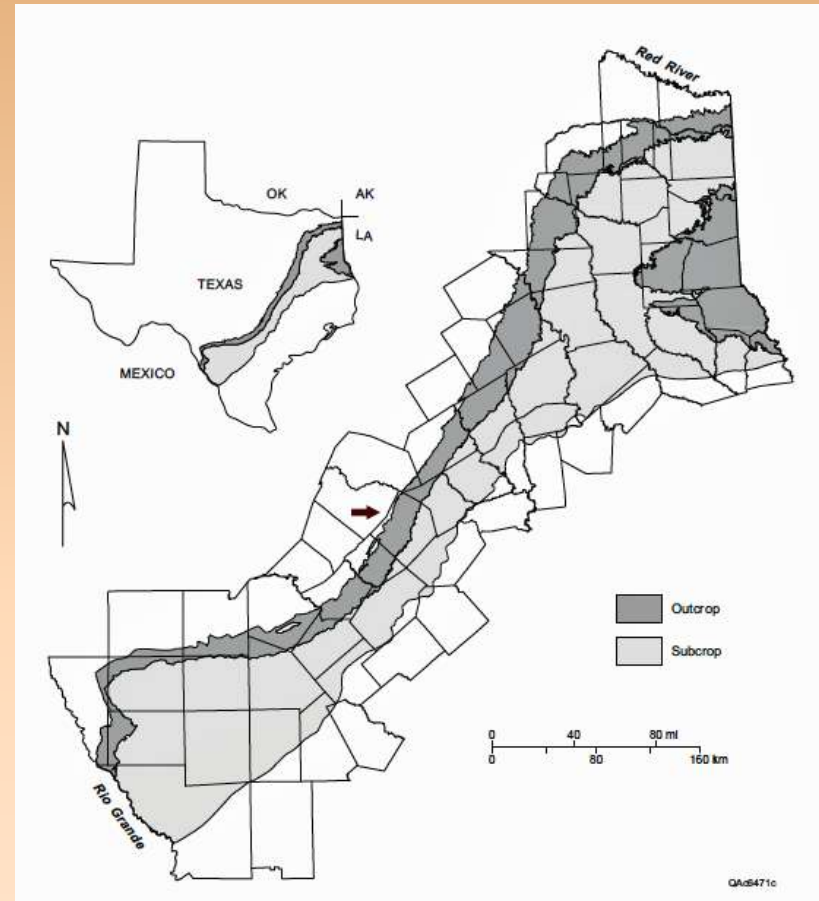
IN THE BEGINNING: SOIL AND ROCKS

We received permission to collect rocks on a local property. In homage to local historic landmarks like Bastrop State Park, we focused on gathering Carrizo sandstone and limestone, mostly in the red to yellow color range. We found some chert, too.



IN THE BEGINNING: SOIL AND ROCKS

This sandstone is part of the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer that runs from the Rio Grande northeast to the Red River valley between Texas and Louisiana. Bastrop County, right of the arrow, is nearly completely over this aquifer, with about half outcrop (surface exposure).



Graphic from Bureau of Economic Geology, UT Austin.
http://www.twdb.state.tx.us/gam/czwx_s/cw_report.pdf

IN THE BEGINNING: SOIL AND ROCKS

Some of the stone shows beautiful patterns of layers and colors. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, there are numerous sandstone and limestone deposits in Bastrop County.



IN THE BEGINNING: SOIL AND ROCKS

We used small rocks to outline the border. This was a simple way to envision the bed's shape without locking it in. Pending boulder design and placement might require design changes.



IN THE BEGINNING: SOIL AND ROCKS

What story would this boulder tell, if it could talk? This was from the same 6,000 tons of fill containing mostly Carrizo sandstone, but this rock spent time in running water, as shown by the ripple effects on the edge and top. It was also the heaviest: about half a ton.



SPOTLIGHT ON ROCKS: BOULDER FOCAL POINTS

Most boulders reflect the prevalence of Carrizo sandstone. This was the second largest, around 500 pounds. It also has the most dramatic color banding, which is why it is front and center on the street side.



SPOTLIGHT ON ROCKS: BOULDER FOCAL POINTS

Not all boulders were flattened sandstone. This small chert boulder contains both lighter and darker colors than the Carrizo sandstone, ranging from tan to purplish-black.



SPOTLIGHT ON ROCKS: BOULDER FOCAL POINTS

Rocks like these weren't wasted as edging! The whole point of the design is to include local rocks as focal points, creating a native, natural look exhibiting Bastrop's natural beauty.



SPOTLIGHT ON ROCKS: NATURAL BEAUTY

This picture represents most of the smaller rocks harvested from the surface of the 6,000 tons of fill dumped on the property. These are for edging the bed and retaining structures in the soil zone, to create and maintain contours and prevent erosion.



SPOTLIGHT ON ROCKS: EDGING STONES

We imported sand and rabbit manure to build a healthy, well-drained base-layer subsoil. The manure is underneath the sand.

By this time, we'd placed boulders, as seen at the near end.



PREPARING THE SUBSOIL: SAND AND MANURE

A rototiller mixed the sand and rabbit manure into the existing soil, which turned out to be chocolate loam. This was a pleasant surprise, because earlier probes into the soil were stopped at 3 inches by hardpan created from years of sun and heat.



PREPARING THE SUBSOIL: SAND AND MANURE

We assembled the back retaining wall next. Until the topsoil arrived, we removed all rocks except boulders on the street side of the bed, so the delivery truck could dump the soil directly into the bed.



BUILDING THE BACK RETAINING WALL

We fit rocks together like puzzle pieces wherever possible, trying to maintain a natural look while also using the least material necessary to contain the soil. The varying height reflects the plan for the bed to be contoured when finished.



BUILDING THE BACK RETAINING WALL

We installed some flatter rocks on their edges, digging shallow trenches for more secure footing. Wherever possible, we placed the most picturesque side out.



BUILDING THE BACK RETAINING WALL

Some rocks were thick enough to act as small boulders. Other rocks were flat and nondescript, so they served as a base layer upon which we placed prettier ones.



BUILDING THE BACK RETAINING WALL

This rock contains many shell patterns, so this side faces the house.



BUILDING THE BACK RETAINING WALL

On the bed side, we braced it up with smaller rocks, so that it wouldn't compress the soil while appearing to be leaning against the dirt after installing the soil.



BUILDING THE BACK RETAINING WALL

This sandy loam is from a Bastrop County site. It raised the grade over 2 feet within the bed's larger circular areas. This became the middle-layer subsoil upon which the topsoil would rest.



IMPORTING SOIL

Once the sandy loam was in place, we finished the retaining wall and imported topsoil.

Next, we placed potted plants for a clearer idea of what the paper design would look like when finished; this allows for alterations before planting.



PRELIMINARY PLACEMENT

After initial plant placement, we took detailed pictures and inserted stakes as placeholders. Then we installed more rocks to help highlight specimen plants and integrate the entire design. These rocks also serve as internal retaining walls to reduce erosion.



INTERIOR ROCKSCAPE

This shot taken at sunset shows how the evening sun's redder light brings out the colors in the rocks. This is a sample of what we see from the house in the evening.



INTERIOR ROCKSCAPE

During Phase 1, we installed permanent specimen plants. Plants sitting on the soil look different after planting, so a few specimens ended up in different places than originally planned. We left spaces for succulent annuals and ground covers.



INSTALLING PLANT MATERIAL

We planted *Portulaca x Yubi* (Purslane) for ground cover. This filled in space between specimen plants, and also provided 'living mulch' to protect soil against sun damage and erosion.



INSTALLING PLANT MATERIAL

Portulaca x Yubi (Purslane) turned out to be extremely prolific. The original orange plants went to seed, the offspring produced flower colors ranging from yellow to hot pink to coral. It also covered the rocks and would have smothered specimen plants without some aggressive pruning.



INSTALLING PLANT MATERIAL

This is the finished xeriscape last May.



FINISHED LANDSCAPE

Xeriscape last
October.



FINISHED LANDSCAPE