

Improve the Soil:

Soil is the foundation of every landscape. The better the soil, the more successful a Xeriscape will be. Soil is made up of three main types of particles - sand, silt and clay. In Colorado our soils tend to be either primarily clay or primarily sand. Clay soil has a high moisture retention capacity, but it is slow to absorb water and slow to release it. When water is applied too quickly to clay soil, the soil can't absorb it and most of it runs off. Clay soil also tends to be heavily compacted, making it difficult for plants to establish the deep root systems necessary to survive a drought.

Sandy soil has the exact opposite characteristics. It has excellent drainage and lots of air space for root growth, but does a poor job of retaining moisture and nutrients. Water applied to sandy soil tends to percolate quickly down to the water table. This limits the amount of time plant roots have access to the water.

Fortunately there's a way to improve both clay and sandy soil. That's to amend it by adding lots of organic material, such as aged compost and/or manure. The ideal way to do this is to spread three to five inches of organic material over the top of the existing soil, and rototill as deeply as possible (a depth of six inches is considered sufficient.)

Once a landscape has become established it is much harder to improve the soil. Organic material can be applied to garden beds and worked in by hand. Existing lawns can be top-dressed. This involves spreading a very thin layer of compost (no more than 1/4 inch) over the lawn and letting it slowly sink to the soil level. Over the course of several years regular top-dressing will help build an organic base.

One important note: some native plants prefer soil that is low in organic matter. Before amending the soil, check with the local Cooperative Extension Office to find the best soil preparation practices for specific plants. To find your local office, check the phone book or visit their website, www.ext.colostate.edu