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Gardening with Nature

by Sigrie Kendrick

PLANTS FOR SLOPE RETENTION

Use native plants to help stabilize slopes

Sigrie Kendrick - Jun 7, 2023 / 11:00 am



Photo: Contributed

Native plants used to stabilize this slope on a residential property in Kelowna are shown this year, but were planted last year and include a yellow-flowered sedum, grey rabbitbrush, nodding onion, a showy fleabane, kinnikinnick and native grass mix.



Photo: Contributed

The this same slope as above a year earlier, just after planting.

It's just common sense to look to Mother Nature for advice about solving natural concerns on your landscape, like water, steep slopes and sun exposure or shade.

If recent rain sent a torrent of water sluicing down a steep slope on your property, leaving behind a small creek bed full of rocks and gravel and a pile of soil at the bottom, consider planting native and xeric trees, shrubs, grasses and ground covers which will naturally help to stabilize the slope.

Many residential properties throughout the Okanagan have to deal with steep slopes. Our silty soils are notorious for losing stability when exposed to higher-than-normal volumes of water such as intense rainfalls or a sudden rush of water from water line breaks or leaks.

Josh Smith, a director of the Okanagan Xeriscape Association and manager of XEN Xeriscape Endemic Nursery in West Kelowna explains that a cost-effective, low-maintenance and eco-friendly solution is to take advantage of Mother Nature's suggestions: plant strong-rooted native and xeriscape plants that are adapted to survive and thrive on our slopes—and in our dry environment—to retain the soil and beautify the space.

Developing a naturalized slope-retention system on your property can take several seasons of monitoring but once it is established, it should require zero maintenance, irrigation, or upkeep.

Some key points for getting started include:

- Control the weeds until the trees, shrubs, grasses or ground covers get established. Some invasive species in the Okanagan are virulent enough to take over a slope and hinder the growth of shrubs and trees you have planted or which seed themselves.

- Grass blends or ground-cover are necessary to occlude weeds and provide surface erosion protection. These species help retain the top 10 to 20 cm of the soil.

- Tree and shrub species are what will provide deep, long-lasting, structural support to help stabilize the slope over the long term.

Smith recommends that if you are choosing plant species for slope retention or naturalized areas, go for a walk in your neighbourhood and look carefully at what is growing on natural slopes in your area. This is a surefire way to ensure you select species suited to your soil and moisture conditions.

There are many wonderful resources available to help you identify native species and learn more about their growth characteristics. Phone apps like iNaturalist and Seek can help you identify plants. There are also several Okanagan-specific plant identification books, including *Trees, Shrubs and Flowers to Know in B.C.* by C.P. Lyons, and *Plants of Southern Interior B.C.* by Parish, Coupe and Lloyd, or you can take photos. They can help you look up the plant characteristics in books or on the Internet. You can also take your photos to a native plant nursery for an expert to help you identify the plant.

OXA has an extensive plant database of ornamental and native species. To access it, go to: okanaganxeriscape.org and click on "Plant Database."

There are also specialized native plant nurseries like XEN and Sagebrush Nursery in Oliver, and many other nurseries carry a selection of native and xeric species.

Follow us on social media for inspiration on the sustainable beauty that is xeriscape.

The Okanagan Xeriscape Association is extremely grateful for the ongoing financial support of the Okanagan Basin Water Board and is proud to be collaborating with them on their Make Water Work campaign.

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