

SAVE OUR TREES



John Pate, landscape architect and SEHNA board member, expertly details how we can save our trees from extinction and why they are so vital to our Albuquerque neighborhoods.

Many of the dead or dying trees in the neighborhood are doing so due to natural attrition, as our neighborhood was originally platted in the 1920s, and many trees have perished simply due to their age. However, I am sure many of you have noticed a greater number of dying or dead trees in the neighborhood.

Many in our beautiful neighborhood are modifying their landscapes to consume less water, and it is an admirable endeavor. While we certainly don't want to discourage anyone in the neighborhood from conserving water, we still ask you to please do so without killing your trees.

WHY TREES MATTER

Trees and shade are major contributors to an improved quality of life, lower heating and cooling costs, and make the outdoors much more desirable. There are, however, effective, practical ways for homeowners in our arid climate to significantly reduce landscape water use while keeping trees healthy. These approaches are commonly recommended by desert horticulture experts and water agencies.

CONSIDERATIONS

When considering modifications to your landscapes, consider these nine things.

9 Important Considerations

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1. PRIORITIZE TREES FIRST

Trees take years to replace, so they should receive water before lawns or small plants.

- Keeping trees on separate hydrozones (separate valves or watering schedules) so they get deep, infrequent irrigation rather than frequent lawn-style watering.
- Let turf or non-essential plants go dormant or replace them—not the trees.

2. SWITCH TO DEEP, INFREQUENT WATERING

Desert-adapted plants—including many tree species—prefer long, slow irrigation.

- Apply water under the tree canopy or just outside the dripline.
- Water to a depth of 18–24 inches for trees.
- Use drip emitters or bubblers rather than sprinklers.
- Frequency guide (adjust for weather/soil):
 - Summer: every 2–4 weeks
 - Spring/Fall: every 4–6 weeks
 - Winter: every 6–8 weeks

3. REPLACE THIRSTY PLANTS WITH DESERT-ADAPTED SPECIES

Choose native or low-water species such as;

- Trees: mesquite, palo verde, desert willow, acacia, ironwood
- Shrubs/perennials: sage species, brittlebush, chuparosa, desert milkweed
- Groundcover: decomposed granite, cactus gardens, or low-water succulents
- These species need periodic deep irrigation, but not daily or weekly watering once established.

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4. IMPROVE SOIL MOISTURE RETENTION

Even in sandy desert soils, water retention can be increased.

- Apply 2–4 inches of mulch (wood chips or composted mulch) under trees—but keep mulch several inches away from the trunk.
- Mulch slows evaporation, reduces soil temperature, and decreases irrigation needs by 25–50%.
- Where desired, convert turf grass to gravel + mulch islands around trees.

5. AUDIT AND OPTIMIZE THE IRRIGATION SYSTEM

A surprising amount of water is lost to waste. Here's some ways you can improve your water efficiency.

- Check for leaks, overspray onto hardscapes, clogged emitters, or broken valves.
- Convert spray heads to pressure-regulated drip systems.
- Adjust emitters as trees grow: increase the number of emitters rather than increasing the flow rate.
- Use smart controllers that adjust for temperature and rainfall.

6. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF PASSIVE WATER HARVESTING

These methods guide rainwater or graywater toward trees.

- Shape soil into basins or swales to catch runoff from roofs or walkways.
- Use permeable hardscapes to let water soak in rather than run off.
- Divert laundry-to-landscape graywater to trees if practical.

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7. REDUCE TREE STRESS WITH GOOD MAINTENANCE

Healthy trees need less water.

- Avoid heavy pruning that stresses trees.
- Don't plant turf directly against the trunk.
- Prevent compaction around the root zone.

8. REMOVE OR REDUCE HIGH-WATER-USE FEATURES

To save the most water without harming trees, phase out the thirstiest elements:

- Cool-season lawns
- Annual flower beds
- Water-hungry shrubs
- Large turf strips along driveways/streets

9. REPLACE DEAD OR DYING TREES WITH WATER WISE TREE SELECTIONS

There are many varieties of trees suitable to our climate that require less water.

There are many ways to improve your landscape without damaging the greenery around you.

WE CAN'T WAIT TO SEE WHAT YOU DO!

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