



Okanagan Xeriscape Association

www.okanaganxeriscape.org

A Process of Cultural Change: Promoting Xeriscapes in the Okanagan Valley

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Background



The Okanagan is a semi-arid valley located in British Columbia, Canada that receives 11 inches of precipitation per year. The valley's population is 300,000 and rapidly growing. 2008 and 2009 were drought years that necessitated water restrictions. Steadily increasing variability in weather patterns predicts more drought in coming years.

Figure 1. Location of the Okanagan Valley, BC, Canada

Currently, 24% of all water used in the Okanagan goes onto the domestic outdoor landscape. Xeriscape landscaping could reduce this amount substantially, as xeriscaping can reduce water consumption by 30 – 100% compared to a traditional Kentucky Bluegrass lawn.

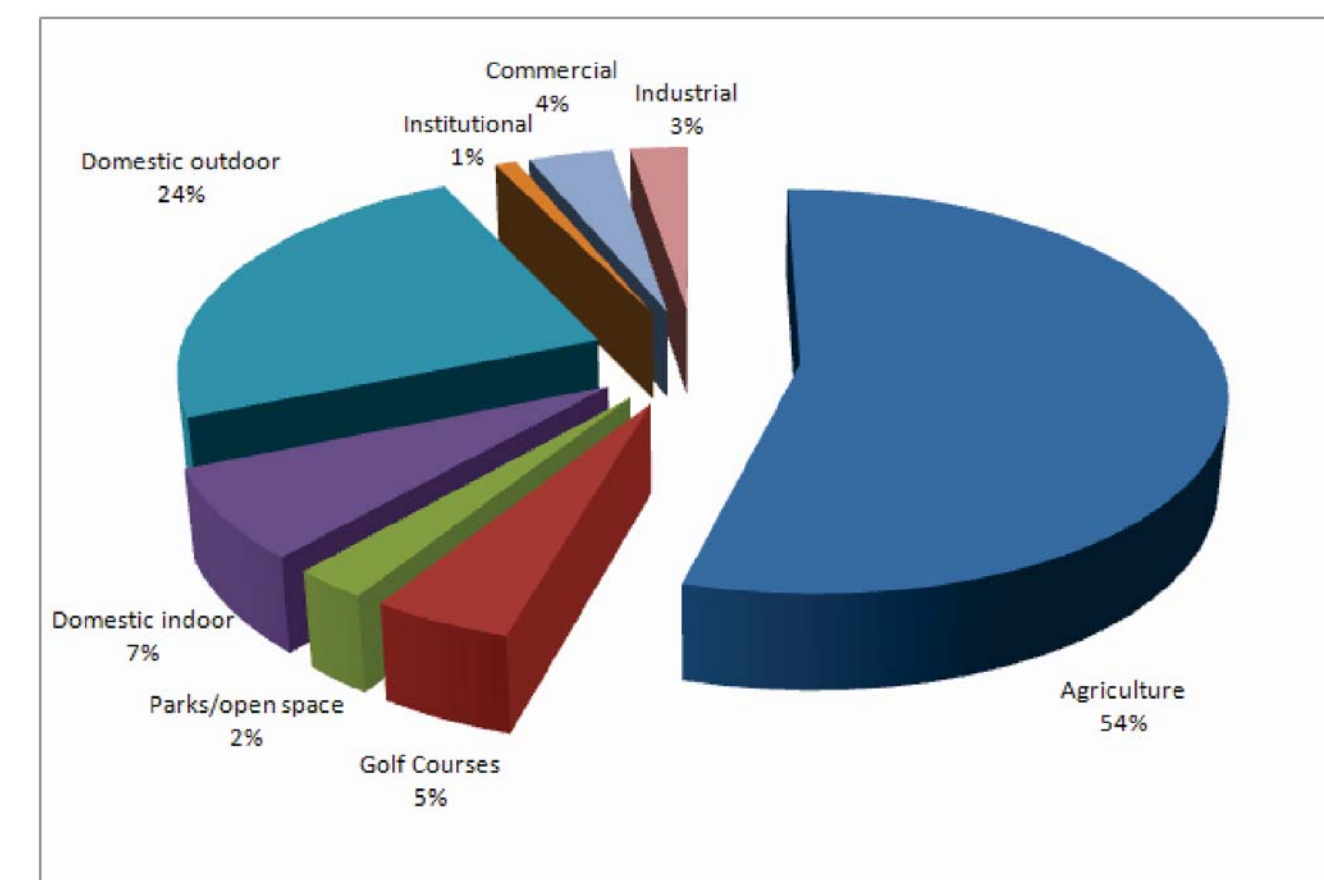


Figure 2. Typical (1996 – 2006) average distribution of total water use by end-users in the OK Basin.

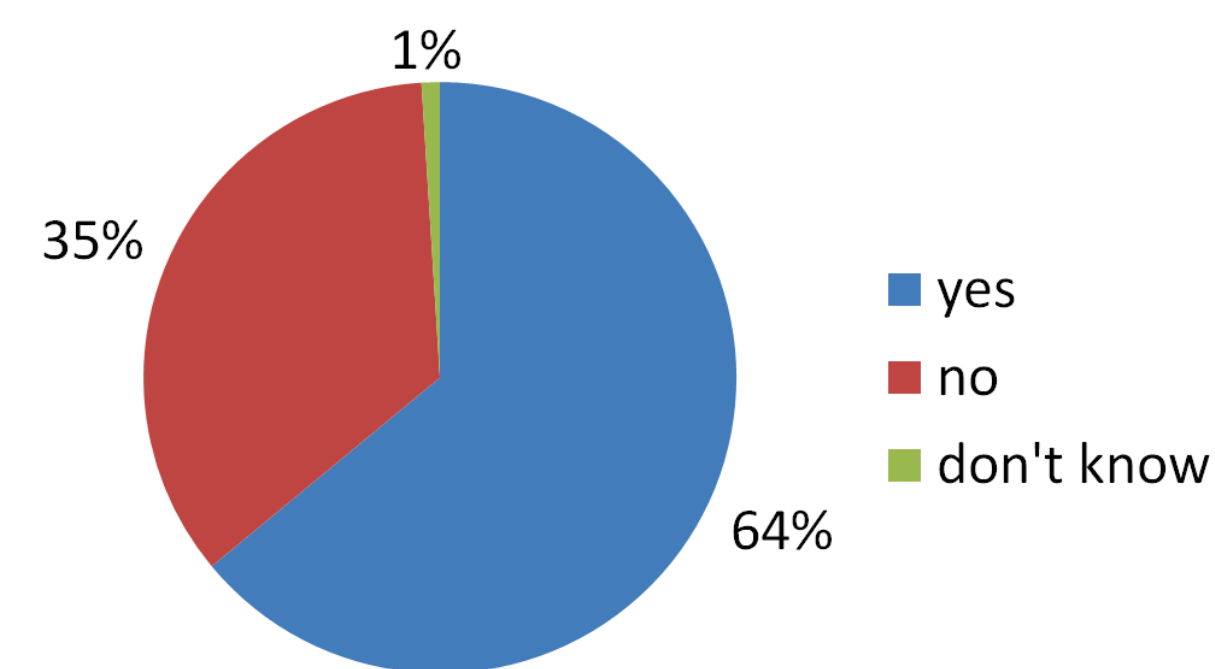


Figure 3. Are your images of xeriscaped landscapes appealing to you?

A Barrier to the Adoption of Xeriscape

Nearly 40% of Okanagan residents surveyed in December 2008 had never heard the term 'xeriscape'. Of those respondents who had heard the term, over one-third said that they do not find the 'look' of xeriscape appealing because it is just rocks, gravel and yucca.

The OXA - Aiming to Change the Face of Landscaping in the Okanagan

Two of the barriers to adoption of xeriscape in the Okanagan are lack of awareness and the misperception that xeriscape is naught but rocks and cactus. The Okanagan Xeriscape Association (OXA) is a non-profit organization that was formed in 2009 to dispel this myth and to educate and inspire residents about the benefits and beauty of xeriscapes.

Our public awareness strategy in the first year of operation has included building a 4000 square foot public xeriscape demonstration garden, developing an on-line searchable plant database, offering xeriscape classes to residents and landscape professionals, and holding a xeriscape gardening contest.

Activities



Figure 4. unH2O Garden site 'before'



Figure 5. unH2O Garden site 'after'



Figure 6. butterfly garden

The unH2O Garden

The OXA partnered with the City of Kelowna to secure 4000 sq. feet of land in front of a new recreation facility that sees an average of 40,000 visitors per month in the summertime. The garden was designed with 5 distinct theme areas to showcase the variety of gardening styles possible using xeriscape principles: included are a native plant garden, an ornamental grass garden, a butterfly garden, a Mediterranean garden, and a rock garden. The garden's plant signage and a take-home brochure will give residents information they need to xeriscape their own yards. The garden is also used as a classroom to teach the seven principles of xeriscape and hands-on gardening skills.

This project was undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through the Department of the Environment.

The OXA Plant Database

The website's plant database features photos and detailed information for over 400 drought-tolerant and low water plants that can be searched by a number of attributes including height, spread, light requirements, and special features such as 'native', 'attracts butterflies', or 'erosion control'.



Figure 7. database search page Figure 8. sample search result

Measuring Change

To measure changing xeriscape awareness and action in the Okanagan, a representative survey of residents was conducted in September 2010 to determine a baseline measurement of xeriscape perception and activity. The same survey will be conducted in Sept 2011 against which baseline results can be compared to determine change. Baseline results will be available at the 2010 WSI conference.