

Cover

Editorials

Columns

Arts

March Issue coming out February 28

In This Issue:

Thinking about Frederick Douglass by Marien Helz

The objective ... is for there to be History, as correct and even as possible. But as the parent is constantly saying to the young child on a long car trip, "No, we're not there yet." We, therefore, are paying tribute in February, Black History Month, to Frederick Douglass, a remarkable human being by any standard.

in [Editorials](#)

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Xeriscaping by Wayne Johnson

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in [Columns](#)

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Word Worth's Site of the Month
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in [Arts](#)

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Word Worth Volume II issues are available in [Archives](#)

January 2002 V II N1

Editorials: Choosing A College--Marien Helz
Columns: Winter Landscape--Susan Johnson
Arts: Photography--Tiffany M. Stuck

Word Worth Volume I archives are available in page [2001](#)

December 2001 V I N12

Editorials: Season of Evergreen--Marien Helz
Columns: Bah Humbug!--Susan Johnson
Arts: Father Heart--Banwell Goddard

November 2001 V I N 11

Editorials: Tolerance: Double.... --Marien Helz
Columns: Suddenly, It's Clear--Susan Johnson
Arts: Father Heart--Banwell Goddard

October 2001 V I N10

Editorials: Learning the Right....--Marien Helz
Columns: Fall Colors--Susan Johnson
Arts: Father Heart--Banwell Goddard

September 2001 V I N9

Editorials: The Censorship--Marien Helz
Columns: Organic Gardening--Susan Johnson
Arts: Father Heart--Banwell Goddard

August 2001 V I N8

Editorials: Pro Life and Choice--Marien Helz
Columns: Oriental Rugs--Susan Johnson
Arts: Father Heart--Banwell Goddard

July 2001 V I N7

Editorials: Independence Values--Marien Helz
Columns: The Sixth Extinc...--Susan Johnson
Arts: Father Heart--Banwell Goddard

June 2001 V I N6

Editorials: East of the Dawn--Marien Helz
Columns: Buffalo in Bloom--Susan Johnson
Arts: Father Heart--Banwell Goddard

May 2001 V I N5

Editorials: Parents as Friends--Marien Helz
Columns: Wedding Flowers--Susan Johnson
Arts: Father Heart--Banwell Goddard

April 2001 V I N4

Editorials: Everyday Linguistics--Marien Helz
Columns: Great Lakes Racing--Susan Johnson
Arts: Father Heart--Banwell Goddard

March 2001 V I N3

Editorials: The Peter Pan Gen...--Marien Helz
Columns: Thyme for the M...--Susan Johnson
Arts: Photography by David Clark

February 2001 V I N2

Editorials: Driven to Distr...--Susan Johnson
Columns: A Valentine for My Mother
Arts: Photography by Armin Helz

January 2001 V I N1

Editorials: Hale Chatfield--M H Perry
Columns: Havasupai--Susan Johnson
Arts: Poetry By Hale Chatfield

Introductory issue December 2000 V I N ii

Editorials: Election 2000--Marien Helz Columns: Natural Born Killers--Susan Johnson Arts: Season's Poem and Photograph

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Cover

Thinking about Frederick Douglass

by Marien Helz

The objective of any designation such as *Black History Month*, *Women's History Month*, *Child Abuse Awareness Month*, is its own obsolescence. The goal is



for there to be History, as correct and even as possible. But as the parent is constantly saying to the young child on a long car trip, "No, we're not there yet." We, therefore, are paying tribute in February, Black History Month, to Frederick Douglass, a remarkable human being by any standard.

One of the things one learns from Douglass' writings is that if slavery had continued, it would have crossed the color barrier. At one point when Douglass was on loan to poor city relatives, they sent him to work in a factory. He was severely

beaten by white workers. Those who dismiss this as racism, miss the crucial point. While people who owned slaves could send the slaves to factories in order to make extra money for the masters, the freemen who desperately depended on their factory earnings to support their families would not be able to earn a living wage if the ranks of the labor force were to be flooded with slaves. The men who beat up Douglass were, indeed, fighting for their lives. Douglass' own situation was indicative of the direction that slavery would take. He was the son of his white master. This gave him no privileges. He pointed out that the master in these cases was always under pressure to show no favoritism to children suspected of being his and thereby reveal to his wife that he was a shameful adulterous rapist.

A particularly intriguing thing about Douglass' writing is the journalistic objectivity of it. Students go to four years of college in our day, and then on to graduate school and often never achieve the level of reporting that Douglass mastered without the benefit of education. He never went to school since teaching a slave how to read was against the law. For a short period of time, Douglass was owned by a mistress who was unaware of the law and began to teach him. Upon hearing her husband correct her for starting to teach him the alphabet, Douglass had an epiphany enlightening him regarding the value of education. He realized that therein lay his route to freedom and thereafter learned to read by stealth. He related:

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. ...I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the name of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude

and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offense to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. ...I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life!* Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?" These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.

In an age when we attribute any lack of character to faulty parenthood, Douglass' ability to survive at all is awe inspiring. He knew who his father was only by rumor and by the fact that he, himself, was a despised mulatto. His mother was merely a shadowy figure who walked twelve miles after spending back breaking days in the fields just to lie down beside him at night. She had to rise before daybreak or face severe beating. She died by the time he was seven years old, and he had no memory of her, having seen her in daylight only a few times in his life.

In so far as Douglass ever thought about his father, he surely could only feel contempt for this man who generated children of whom he took no care, but whom he relegated to the horrors of slavery for the duration of their lives and for the duration of the lives of all their descendants as far as could be foreseen. In 1729 Jonathan Swift wrote *A Modest Proposal* in order to draw attention to the bad condition in which the Irish lived. In that tract, with biting satire Swift recommended that a market be developed in which Irish babies could be sold for food thereby solving the problem of poverty and starvation in Ireland. All those who read the tract were shocked, horrified, and infuriated that someone could suggest such a thing. Yet weren't the slave-owning fathers doing something as execrable? Douglass' detached descriptions of the beating of slaves for half an hour at a time in which their blood ran down their backs like water are chilling in themselves, but when one realizes that slave owners coldly begat children who would inevitably be subjected to such torture gives anyone with a modicum of insight a glimpse of depravity so extreme that no movie of the horror genre could ever capture the extent of it. These fathers benefited monetarily from the engendering of their own children, from the pain and torment that would be their lot, from the gloomy existence that was to be their destiny.

There were, of course, good people who owned slaves. When one is born into a corrupt system, fighting it on one's own is not as easy as it seems to those who cannot imagine it. For those who were "born" slave owners, freeing slaves was not simple matter. The owner would have to carefully consider how these people for whom he or she had been responsible could be protected. Safe guards had to be developed so the freed slaves would be able to support themselves, to provide for medical needs, to be secure against "night riders" who kidnapped slaves and former slaves in order to sell them to labor far south in swampy dismal terrain where none could survive for long. George Washington studied how to free his slaves, and the task was managed following his death. Thomas Jefferson railed against slavery in an early draft of the Declaration of Independence, but the passage was dropped in order to prevent dividing the colonies which would have doomed their fight for independence.

It takes true greatness of character, however, to overcome the eroding dangers that an evil systems generates. *Power tends to corrupt*; as Lord Acton wrote in 1887, *absolute power corrupts absolutely*.

Frederick Douglass expressed the same idea when he wrote in 1845 about the

mistress in Baltimore to whom he was lent during his childhood:

Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course....

Douglass entered his Baltimore mistress' home when he was around seven or eight years old. He stated:

...Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music.

But, alas! This kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon.

An enlightening thing for the especially insightful, is the fact that one of the first things Douglass did upon escaping to freedom was to marry. He apparently wanted to *own* his wife, his children. Whereas, no one really owns their children or spouse, if we can imagine someone else owning our children, some hostile person having the sole legal right to make decisions about their food, their clothing, their medical attention, about every thing the children did and said, then we can understand the privilege that the institution of marriage must have represented for Douglass. With his background, that he was able to successfully marry, to raise children, to become an admired contributor to his society is a magnificent tribute to the human spirit.

Frederick Douglass is a black hero, an African-American hero, and an American hero, a hero of all times and of all peoples. His life was and always will be a tribute to humanity in the face of evil, of idealism in the face of depravity, of glory in the face of degradation.

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XERISCAPING

by Wayne Johnson

What does a transplanted Easterner miss the most in Arizona? The green, green grass of home. Eyes accustomed to lovely sweeps of verdant lawn spend their first days searching the brown scape of the west for the rich color of chlorophyll. And when they find a bank or the entrance to a new development with a patch of heavily irrigated grass, the eyes gleam in happy recognition—but not for long. Soon the newcomer learns that green in the desert is not only politically incorrect, it's ecologically unwise.



Edward Abbey, the rancorous writer, author of *Desert Solitaire* and the *Monkey Wrench Gang*, recognized as early as the late '60's the effect that millions of relocating Northerners and Easterners were having on his beloved Southwest. His books warned that the lawns and heavily leafed trees, arriving along with their owners, were sucking the desert dry and he castigated the diversion of rivers and the immense dams that were constructed to support these newcomers. With Phoenix growing from a population of 300,000 in the 50's to over 2,000,000 in the year 1990, Abbey predicted that the fragile ecosystem of the Western United States would never survive.

At the same time, cities in Nevada, Utah, and Colorado experienced similar levels of growth. These rapidly increasing population centers in the southwest, combined with the demands of agricultural irrigation, fulfilled Abbey's direst predictions, depleting western ground water resources severely and, finally, prompting strong protests against the diversions and heated debates as to the ownership of water resources.

On top of this on-going expansion, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's drought map, many western states, including Arizona and west Texas, and most of the Eastern Seaboard states are experiencing drought conditions ranging from moderate to severe, with exceptional drought in some localized areas that continues today.

These relatively widespread drought conditions trigger restrictive water use regulations in the afflicted regions and communities. In fact, when the West Coast region of the U.S. experienced a drought lasting six years, from the late 1980's to the early 1990's, California residents were forced to implement aggressive water conservation measures and water as a commodity became more expensive.

As a result of eco-writers like Abbey, and the pervasive effects of the droughts, conservation and the sensible use of available water resources, including xeriscaping, has become a pertinent topic.

The term xeriscape may be new to some people, but it quickly gained recognition in Colorado and California and is becoming more common throughout the developed world. The Greek word, xeros, meaning "dry", has been combined with "landscape" to produce a hybrid term which, by and large, means sensible, water-efficient landscaping.

The six basic principles of xeriscaping call for a well-considered design, use of adapted drought-tolerant plants, efficient irrigation, soil improvement if necessary, mulches, and timely maintenance.

Xeriscaping, properly done, can be aesthetically pleasing and need not resemble a large expanse of gravel, rocks, and cactus. Many native plants are beautiful, drought tolerant, and capable of surviving on natural rainfall or a minimal amount of drip irrigation. The ideal xeriscape plants are those placed in their natural environment, that are likely to survive free of artificial inducement.

The high desert region of North Central Arizona, at an elevation of 4,000 to 5,000 feet above sea level, averages seventeen inches of rainfall per year. Native plants thriving in this region include Utah juniper, Arizona cypress, agave, manzanita, and fourwing saltbush.

The Sonoran desert areas are lower, at 1,000 to 2,000 feet elevation, and get even less rainfall - only seven to ten inches annually. Commonly found native plants here include saguaro and prickly pear cactus, ocotillo, palo verde, creosote bush, and mesquite.

Plants that are ideal for xeriscaping have a variety of characteristics that enable them to survive in extreme conditions. Expansion and contraction of roots, stems, and leaf tissues, shedding of foliage, or extreme root penetration to new strata of soil ensure the survival of some of these species. For instance, desert willow, mesquite, and soap tree yucca have deep taproots that seek out subterranean water strata. Once established, they're capable of surviving long periods of drought that may extend for years at a time.

Other plants possess relatively shallow yet extensive lateral root systems, enabling them to quickly absorb any of the sporadic rainfall that occurs in arid regions. Saguaro cactus is a prime example with its horizontally far-reaching mat of roots that extend less than a foot into the soil despite the fact that the cactus grows up to a height that can reach forty to fifty feet and can weigh as much as ten to fifteen tons.

Creosote bush has yet another way of adapting. Through the use of a waxy coating, its small leaves restrict transpiration, enabling the plant to thrive in parts of the southwest that receive minimal moisture.

Rainfall isn't the only consideration. Choosing plant material suited to the available soil type eliminates the need for amending the soil and thereby creating unnatural conditions.

Arid southwestern soils typically have a high pH (above 7, which is neutral). Clay, sand, decomposed granite, and caliche may be encountered. Caliche, or an impermeable layer of calcium carbonate, can inhibit percolation of water into the soil and in addition, constitutes a nearly impenetrable hardpan that requires the use of heavy equipment including backhoes and jackhammers.

Sandy soil types tend to leach nutrients as water moves rapidly through them. Organic soil amendment is a temporary fix but the use of mulch and slow release fertilizer granules or tablets can provide a longer-lasting solution.

Heavy clay soils inhibit water percolation and often lack sufficient oxygen: water can be trapped, causing plant roots to rot and die. Amendment may be necessary here. Tilling the soil and incorporating well composted organic matter and coarse sand or pumice improves the soil structure.

Another basic concept of xeriscaping is to group together low water use plants and moderate water use plants. This simplifies the installation of any drip irrigation zones that may be needed.

Of course, considerable thought should precede the decision to irrigate. Is there water available to irrigate? People in many parts of the country, including some eastern state residents, are hard pressed to pump enough water for cooking, bathing, and laundry, much less to water the landscape.

Others, on public water systems or with decent wells, have more latitude. Nonetheless, the whole idea behind xeriscaping is that good quality water is a finite resource and should be used efficiently in the landscape.

Sprinkler head systems will spray water up into the air and, through evaporation and overspray, often prove wasteful. If such a system is selected, it should be programmed to water at night when the sun is not a factor. This type of system is usually reserved for turf areas.

Drip irrigation is much more efficient, putting water directly into the root zone where it will do the maximum good. In addition, various zones can be programmed to supply water at different times and durations, depending on the season and the needs of the plant groups.

Infrequent, deep irrigation promotes a more extensive root system than does frequent shallow irrigation. It will also condition plants to better tolerate drought conditions.

Other sources of water may be found in roof runoff and collection and re-routing of rainwater from paved areas. These sources, with a bit of ingenuity, can be directed to various higher-need areas of the landscape and garden.

Mulch is another important facet of xeriscaping. Mulches cool the soil, minimize evaporation of soil moisture, prevent weed growth and erosion, and provide another element of interest in the landscape. It can take many forms: fine or coarse gravel, decomposed granite, crushed stone, shredded bark, wood chips, pine needles, leaves, wood chips, cocoa shells, among others. Considerations include cost, erosion probability due to grade, wind, and rainfall, aesthetics, weight, lifespan, and color retention.

A typical #2 washed gravel mulch might be applied at a depth of three to four inches over the top of porous weed barrier fabric. This "geo-textile" or woven polypropylene material allows air and water to penetrate into the soil while severely restricting the growth of any weed seeds that might blow onto the surface mulch and germinate therein. A real labor saver over the long haul, it helps conserve moisture also.

There are however, situations where weed barrier shouldn't be used. Ground cover areas and mass plantings of perennials or annuals would be the most obvious. Many of these plants send out runners, rhizomes, or tubers underground as a means of spreading, and a physical barrier would severely limit the plant growth. Weed barrier can be used with some perennials and ornamental grasses but as the clumps grow larger, its openings will need to be enlarged with a sharp knife or pair of scissors.

Kentucky bluegrass turf areas work fine in regions of high annual rainfall, requiring thirty to forty inches of water per year. Arid or semi-arid regions, should consider eliminating turfgrass altogether, or at least choosing native grasses that survive on minimal water.

For those who insist on grass—buffalograss resists drought, tolerates extreme heat and cold, and needs little in the form of mowing and fertilizing. It has limitations, however. It does not tolerate traffic or shade well, tends to green up late in the spring and turns brown early in the fall.

Plant selection also requires answering a few basic questions before proceeding:

- ◆ How much space is available for each plant or plant group?
- ◆ What purpose will the plant serve - shade, colorful flowers, fragrance, fruit, ground cover, screen?
- ◆ What shape or form is desired i.e. broad, spreading, tall, columnar, weeping, horizontal?
- ◆ What site conditions exist? Sun, shade, wind, soil conditions, available moisture, noise, etc.?
- ◆ What hardiness zone must the plant endure - just because a region can be hot and dry doesn't mean that it doesn't also have periods of severe cold.

Ornamental grasses are a worthy category of plants to incorporate into the xeriscape. Blue fescue, blue gamma, blue oat grass, switchgrass, and Indian grass are some possibilities. Evolution has enabled many blue and blue-gray foliated plants (grasses included) with the ability to reflect heat and sunlight and thus tolerate extreme conditions. Graceful, fluid motion, initiated by the slightest breeze is reason enough to include at least a few of these drought tolerant beauties.

Avoiding excessive use of fertilizer is another tenet as it will encourage lush, vigorous growth, thus requiring more water. Soft plant tissue transpires rapidly and desiccation occurs when subjected to the stress of heat, wind, and drought.



The design for the new home in Sedona, Arizona that is shown in the [before](#) and [after](#) photographs incorporates the principles of xeriscaping, clearly illustrating the beautiful effects that can be achieved despite extremely low water use.

- ◆ The sole tree left by the builder is a Utah juniper in front of the house. Drought tolerant, the juniper is not on the drip system, surviving on natural rainfall. Since it provides not only welcome shade to the front porch but also hundreds of berries that attract cardinals, robins, and other colorful birds, it was allowed to remain as part of the design.
- ◆ Drip irrigation was installed to provide timed applications of water directly to the root systems of certain trees and shrubs. The system is computerized, delivering water at pre-set intervals that change in summer and winter.
- ◆ All weeds were removed from the property, primarily for their unsightliness, but also to eliminate their preemptive use of any rainfall or irrigation. Crushed red rock was used as a mulch to deter future encroachment by tumbleweeds and other opportunistic weeds.
- ◆ In the front of the house, trailing rosemary, a low-water use herb, was used for its beautiful flowers and mounding effects. Blue prickly pear cacti were used near the rosemary to complement their bluish coloration. Pink flowering manzanitas and grey-leaved cotoneasters, both drought-tolerant, were planted in front of the juniper.
- ◆ Across the driveway, there are teddy bear chollas and mesquite trees, neither of which require irrigation.
- ◆ On the side, two varieties of pampas grass were used, a standard and a dwarf, to provide beauty and motion as well as privacy from a nearby road. Agave and Texas sage, along with Arizona cypress are planted there as well.

■ And, in the back of the house, ocotillo and prickly pear cacti grow without benefit of irrigation while a desert sweet acacia and manzanitas, both with drip irrigation, provide a perch for birds and a spot for jackrabbits, quail, and other small animals to find some shade.

As is evident by the series of photographs, the beauty of this landscape is found in its subtle effects and in the designer's variety of forms, from the elegant plumes of the pampas grass to the weeping habit of the rosemary. The knowledge that the plants sit lightly in the environment, attract birds and aid native animals, adds to the enjoyment it provides. The eyes of a patient Easterner can find plenty of color here, from the iridescent flash of a hummingbird's throat as it drinks from the ruby flowers of the ocotillo, to the camouflage of a coyote as it slinks across the yard, hoping for an early dinner.



It seems to me that the strangeness and wonder of existence are emphasized here, in the desert, by the comparative sparsity of the flora and fauna: life is not crowded upon life as in other places but scattered abroad in sparseness and simplicity, with a generous gift of space for each herb and bush and tree, and each stem of grass.

Edward Abbey 1968
Desert Solitaire

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