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Alamosa Trees
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A Time for Patience

As I walk to the Alamosa Post Office my gaze drifts eastward and my heart stops. The heart-warming stand of large elms, cottonwoods and willows is gone; the earth is packed and barren. About 26 trees were cut down to make way for the new Alamosa City Complex.

It's a bleak landscape now; but many of those trees were in declining old age. My favorite was the huge cottonwood just northwest of the old, one-storey building that still stands on the construction site. The cottonwood was within a few feet of the building and was mostly surrounded by asphalt. I have a feeling the north end of the building was added on quite a while after the tree was planted. Its roots didn't have much access to life-giving water or air and it wasn't thriving.

It had many dead branches and was one of the last trees to leaf out in summer. When an arborist was here last summer we specifically asked him about the cottonwood. He responded that we could spend a lot of money trying to save it, but he thought it wouldn't help.

The Tree Board took a look at the city complex landscaping plan. The first rendition called for 69 trees representing only 6 species. The trees listed for the parking lot median were a type of locust with thorns – not a good choice where people walk!

Also, they had 7 of these trees in a row. I don't think a professional would plant an entire row of one species in this day and age. There at least two good reasons.
1) Planting a lot of trees of the same species near one another greatly increases the possibly of a disease or insect wiping them all out (as happened in many mid-western cities).
2) Planting a lot of trees of one species at the same time means they will all need to be replaced at the same time.
Arborists recommend considering species diversity and future succession when planting trees.

The original plan also showed a Colorado Blue Spruce stuck in a 15' by 15' cranny. The small space would not work for this majestic tree. The plan tucked more than 30 aspens in narrow beds next to the building. An aspen wants to be a grove. Besides their tendency to sucker rampantly (and suckers are difficult to control in non-turf areas), they are affected by numerous insects and diseases and are short lived in the urban landscape according to Colorado State University Extension.

The Tree Board agreed with the landscaper's choice of Big Tooth Maple, 'acer grandidentatum', and Canada Red Chokecherry, 'prunus virginiana'. The maple is native to the Rocky Mountains and should do well in our climate and soil. It may need a fair amount of pruning early on unless a multi-stemmed shrub is desired. There are many Canada Red Chokecherries in town. I have two in my yard and love them. Their leaves are bright green early in the season and they have clusters of white flowers that develop into fruit beloved by birds. By mid-summer, the leaves turn a deep purple-red.

We suggested a larger and somewhat different tree palette. I don't know of any Southwest White Pines in town, so I suggested replacing them with Ponderosa Pines, 'pinus ponderosa', which do well here once established.

I still mourn the loss of the Ponderosas due to the Safeway construction. Fortunately, the best still stands at the corner of Main Street and Poncha. Another, left standing for several years, finally succumbed to root damage incurred during parking lot construction.

To my amazement, the architects took us up on many of our suggestions. They added 5 additional species to the tree palette and ended up with a total of 63 trees.
1) Autumn Purple Ash, 'fraxinus americana': They are long lived, have beautiful fall color, and are known to do well in parking lot strips.
2) Horizon American Elm, 'ulmus americana': These elms are large, well suited to our environment, don't have thousands of seeds, and are Dutch elm disease resistant.
3) Bur Oak, 'quercus macrocarpa': Oaks are slow growing and long-lived. This species is drought tolerant and should do well in the protected downtown environment.
4) Spring Snow Crabapple, 'malus x Spring Snow': We suggested replacing some of the aspens with these fruitless, white-flowered trees that do well in Alamosa.
5) Tatarian Maple, 'acer tatricum Hot Wings': A small tree that should do well near the building. It was developed in Colorado.

Now is the time for patience. We wait for construction to finish. We wait for the landscaping. Then we watch the trees to slowly flourish.

"*Knowing trees, I understand the meaning of patience. Knowing grass, I can appreciate persistence*."
— Hal Borland