

2011 March 30
Alamosa Trees
Marilyn Loser

Just what is a “native” shrub?

It’s all the rage to plant natives.

Several web sites blithely suggest looking around the nearby countryside to see what’s “native”. Clearly, these folks don’t live in Alamosa.

I live on the southwest side of Alamosa and gaze out my window looking for natives. I see small sand dunes, salt grass, and what’s commonly known as “chico”. Nope, this is NOT what I want in my yard, but it’s what is native around my house. So what to do?

I water most of my yard using a low pressure drip system so I’m not limited by Alamosa dryness for my plant selections. However, I do consider cold hardiness, elevation, and the ability to tolerate wide temperature fluctuations, wind, and alkali soil.

I tend to look for shrubs that are listed as native to Colorado or New Mexico and sometimes Wyoming. You can use the “Tree Finder” on the AlamosaTrees.net website to search for trees and shrubs that are native to Colorado or New Mexico.

The following is a list of my favorite deciduous “native” shrubs, all of which are doing well in my Alamosa yard.

- Gambel’s Oak or Rocky Mountain Oak, *quercus gambelii*: I love the lobed leaves of this slow growing shrub. You see a lot of these along the highway between Tres Piedras and Ojo Caliente and on La Veta Pass. Often they turn a beautiful shade of red in the fall. They do need to be watered. They can form colonies, branching out from their root systems, but this hasn’t happened yet in my yard. Rarely do they grow larger than 15 feet high in our surrounding environment.
- Chamisa or Rabbitbrush, *chrysothamnus nauseosus*: I think of bright fall days in New Mexico bumping down back roads lined with yellow blooming chamisa when I think of this shrub. It is a high desert, Rocky Mountain native that needs full sun and requires little water. They grow to about 6 ft. high. An interesting aside: During World War II there was an attempt near Buena Vista to grow chamisa for its natural rubber. The shrubs couldn’t be grown close enough together to make the enterprise cost effective.
- Fernbush, *chamaebatiaria millefolium*: I was unaware of this fast growing, Rocky Mountain native until a few years ago when the Green Spot started carrying them. Already this spring, mine are greening up while the rest of the yard is mostly dormant. They are evergreen in milder climates. They grow to 6-8 ft., have tiny white flowers, and need good drainage. I’ve planted them in sandy parts of my yard.
- Cinquefoil, *potentilla*: These extremely tough, small shrubs are native to the Rocky Mountains and much of the rest of the cooler parts of North America including Canada. I find the yellow flowering varieties to be the hardiest. I have one pink specimen that is also doing well. They are long blooming and don’t require a lot of water.
- Snowberry, *symphoricarpos* species: Often used for windscreens, this North American native suckers easily. So far mine has formed a fairly dense clump with suckers coming up near the original clump (unlike my roses whose shoots pop up 10 to 15 feet away). They don’t need much water or care and have delightful white berries. Some people find their irregular growth habit messy, but I like them.

- Western Sand Cherry, *prunus besseyi*: 1 of 7 *prunus* species allowed in the San Luis Valley. They grow to about 3 ft high. Mine aren't really doing well. They are more scraggly than I'd like. I wonder if they need more water. Has anyone had great success with these? Please let me know at marilyn@AlamosaTrees.net.
- Rose, *rosa* species: My pink flowering ones were harvested near Terrace Reservoir. While I like them, they don't have a long bloom time and are very aggressive spreaders. I would plant them off by themselves if I had it to do over again!

I also have the native currants that spring up all around Alamosa. However, I don't have any of the native chokecherries that are popular with many folk, are drought tolerant and do well in alkaline soil.

The information in this article is mostly from "Trees for Conservation: a Buyer's Guide" from the Colorado State Forest Service and the "Sunset Western Garden Book."

"I am pessimistic about the human race because it is too ingenious for its own good. Our approach to nature is to beat it into submission. We would stand a better chance of survival if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciatively instead of skeptically and dictatorially." E.B. White