



Alamosa Trees *by Marilyn Loser*

Diminishing Tree Canopy?

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I'm saddened as I walk around town and notice the number of trees that have been cut down recently. Some were older trees; some were interfering with utility lines. I'm alarmed when I see that the homeowners and businesses do not plant new trees.

When several blocks of North State Street were renovated, several large trees were removed. The City of Alamosa offered to plant new trees, but the landowners declined, according to City Manager Nathan Cherpeski. He mentioned that the houses were rental properties.

One house on West Street now has only rock and gravel in the front yard. While carefully done, it is barren, with no sign of green or life.

When San Luis Valley Federal Bank cut down 7 large trees in 2009 or 2010, a bank representative told me they were planning to replace them with 12 fruitless crabapples in the spring. Instead, they concreted over the entire north side of the bank along 4th St. and graveled in the east side on Edison. Not a single new tree.

What is the tree canopy and why should we care? According to the Center for Watershed Protection, an urban tree canopy (UTC) "is the layer of leaves, branches and stems of trees that cover the ground when viewed from above." The UTC is essential to many things in an urban community. The canopy produces shade and reduces summer urban heating and noise. Alamosa's tree canopy reduces wind and air pollution. It provides beauty and wildlife habitat.

Just this morning I was delighted to see a large robin in our birdbath. Actually, from its perspective, the birdbath was probably a miniature ice rink. Two years ago a robin couple nested at eye level in one of our Austrian Pines. I watched the nesting birds and then the growing hatchlings. And I love hearing singing birds in my yard throughout the summer. If we didn't have trees, we wouldn't have as many birds.

Many cities have lost substantial numbers of trees and are starting to do something about it. For example, New York City is planting trees in many residential neighborhoods that haven't had trees in years. Seattle requires a permit to remove large trees.

The American Forests organization, the nation's oldest nonprofit conservation organization, suggests a 25% tree cover for municipalities in the Southwest and dry West. I don't know what our UTC is, but I looked at 2007 GPS color images of Alamosa and estimated our UTC is less than 20%. I'll use some statistical sampling methods in the future to get a more accurate figure.

Many of our older, downtown residential-area trees were planted at about the same time. Quite a few have been cut down in the last 10 years as evidenced by large stumps in the parkways between sidewalks

and streets. Some have caused sidewalk heaving. One homeowner worried that many people don't have the funds to properly prune and maintain large, older trees.

When the older trees were planted, water was cheaper and more plentiful. I also wonder if more of the older houses are now rentals and that absentee landlords don't want to have to take care of trees. US Census records show that about 1/3 of housing units in Alamosa were rentals in 1950 – about the same rate as 2000. Tempe, Arizona, now requires maintained landscaping of rental properties.

So what to do in Alamosa? For landlords, the key to keeping the yard of a rental house looking good is to grow trees and plants that require very little care and maintenance. This holds true for many homeowners as well. How about planting medium-sized, drought-tolerant trees and using drip irrigation hooked to an inexpensive timer?

Medium-sized trees provide shade, habitat, and beauty and require less maintenance and water through their lifetimes. I use drip irrigation hose with small emitters placed at the tree's drip line (the outer edge of the tree canopy) -- this gives trees the amount of water they need in just the right places. As a tree grows, the emitters can be moved further from the trunk and more added when needed. A simple battery-operated timer makes sure I don't forget to turn the water on or off! Local greenhouses can help you.

If you have questions or comments, contact email me: Marilyn@AlamosaTrees.net.

DON'T FORGET. April 19 - Tree Pruning Workshop: Make your reservations right away! The Colorado State Forest Service and the Alamosa Tree Board are hosting the day-long Tree Pruning Workshop. The morning session will be classroom style and the afternoon session will be in the field. The cost is \$10 – including materials and a wonderful homemade lunch.

“No town can fail of beauty, though its walks were gutters and its houses hovels, if venerable trees make magnificent colonnades along its streets.” Henry Ward Beecher, Proverbs, 1887