



Xeriscaping in Alamosa: Part 1

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I have a lawn, shade trees, and an inviting garden with gorgeous flowers – AND, I xeriscape! In the last column I outlined the tenets of xeriscaping (water-efficient landscaping). In this column, I will describe how I apply the 7 principles in my own yard. I am stepping out of my usual, trees-only context, and will discuss the entire garden. [To view images of our yard, please visit AlamosaFlowers.net and click on the 'Our Garden' tab.]

- 1) It's all about the soil: Native soils in Alamosa are not very organic and vary from sand to clay. Plants do best in loose soil that retains moisture and contains nutrients. Water drains too quickly through sand. Clay tends to be dense and hinders roots from spreading and taking in oxygen. Further, it may not drain well enough and can cause a plant to drown. While plants create their own food through photosynthesis, they need soil nutrients to prosper.

Our yard is fairly large and originally had a mixture of sand and clay. Over the years we've brought in tons of top soil and compost. This may be more than you need! When starting a new flower bed, I suggest amending the top 18 inches of soil. Depending on the state of your earth, mix in top soil, compost, and/or soil enhancers.

We no longer buy soil by the ton. Last year we purchased some bags of top soil and compost from Boy Scout Troop 307. Also, I 'sort-of' make my own compost. I pitch vegetable kitchen waste and plant waste in a bin; then, we chip and shred it each year. I'm also a fan of Happy Frog soil conditioner.

I tend to check the soil in my flower beds every year. Most beds have a mixture of perennials, annuals and shrubs. There are a few trees also. Before sowing seeds I dig the soil to loosen it and mix in a combination of ingredients. Some wildflower seed packets say to only scratch the surface of the ground before sowing seeds. Their reasoning is that digging encourages weed seeds to sprout. However, I think seeds in my yard can't get a good root-hold unless the soil is loose.

When I add a new perennial, I amend the soil around it. When I plant a shrub or tree, I only back fill with the soil I took out. I also top dress with soil conditioner to several feet beyond the shrub or tree hole.

- 2) Keep lawns small: In the last column, I mentioned that we have a small lawn near our house. I enjoy the lawn without having to spend a lot of time caring for it. When we expanded the lawn 14 years ago, I didn't enhance the soil enough, so water drains through too quickly. We're attempting to fix this by adding some good soil on the top each year. This year we're going to add grass seed that

contains several varieties. We hope that one or more of the varieties will thrive with less water. Lawns are often a good place to grow a tree. If the lawn extends beyond the tree canopy, the entire root system will receive water.

- 3) Use efficient irrigation systems: The area closest to our house is watered by sprinklers on a timer. This includes the lawn, a tree, and a few flower beds. We use two types of low pressure systems in the remainder of the yard. One is a drip system (Netafin). The half-inch hose has emitters every foot. The emitters aren't just holes; they have a mechanism that prevents soil from plugging the holes. Using grid networks, we water our vegetable garden and two flower beds. I believe they used this system at the Boyd Community Garden. The hoses are going strong after 14 years of being on the ground. I started out using soaker hoses but found they clogged up and were ineffective after a couple of years.

The second system uses blue-stripe tubing in which you make holes and plug in a drip cap or mini sprinkler. This type of hose is easier to modify than the emitter hose so you can lay it out in any pattern. The garden in front of Alta Fuels has this system.

When planting trees, people often make a hose loop around a tree. At first, they install a couple of emitters. As the tree grows, more emitters can be added further away from the trunk and the original holes plugged. Remember, trees need to be watered to the edge of the canopy and beyond.

The next Alamosa Trees/Flowers column will discuss the remaining four xeriscaping principles.

“To forget how to dig the earth and to tend the soil is to forget ourselves.” Gandhi