



Xeriscaping in Alamosa: Part 2

by Marilyn Loser

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The last Alamosa Trees column discussed applying 3 of the 7 xeriscaping (water-efficient landscaping) principles to Alamosa gardening. We've dealt with soil, small lawns, and irrigation systems. Here are the remaining 4. As before, I'll use our garden as an example.

- 4) Group together plants with similar water needs: The arrangement of our yard follows the oasis approach. Plants nearer the house – the area we see and spend the most time in --receive the most water and are the lushest. I have some monk's hood and a hydrangea. At the other end of the spectrum are low-water shrubs, such as cinquefoil, currants, lilacs and junipers that are planted further out in the graveled area of the yard and receive the least amount of water.

In between are beds with a mixture of annuals, perennials, and shrubs that receive a low to medium amount of water. Many of my annuals and some perennials reseed and have picked their own favorite spots. For example, I have annual California poppies that have taken over an area between driveway bricks. I never planted them there but they have done wonderfully for 10 years. Perennial columbines and penstemons pop up here and there – I haven't had to buy new ones of these species in years.

- 5) Use drought-tolerant and native plants: The idea of "native plants" is touchy. For our area, just drive past the city limits and look around. You'll see sand, chico, salt grass and perhaps a four-winged saltbush. These local "natives" are not what I want in my yard.

However, I am trying to grow more and more trees, shrubs, and flowers that are native to Colorado and New Mexico. I have 34 native varieties in my yard. You can check out what we grow by visiting AlamosaFlowers.net and clicking on the "Flower Lists" tab, selecting "Flower Finder", checking the "Native to CO or NM" check box and clicking "Find Plants". Clicking on an individual plant in the resultant list will bring up a photo from our garden and specific plant information.

In a similar manner, The AlamosaTrees.net has a "Tree Finder" under the "Tree Lists" tab. Again click on the "Native to CO or NM" check box. I'm collecting photos of local trees for this site.

Local vendors are carrying more and more water-wise/drought-tolerant selections and can help you choose. I'm starting to add this category to both databases mentioned above.

- 6) Apply mulches to retain moisture (and deter weeds): I do this in a few ways. A: Gravel areas with plantings. I cover the areas surrounding plantings with high-quality landscaping fabric and then cover with gravel. The fabric allows water to drain through, but retards weeds from growing up. Remember, roots extend out quite a distance. When I first started gardening, I used plastic instead, -- I didn't realize roots grew out, didn't get enough oxygen and didn't benefit from precipitation. I've

replaced the plastic with fabric.

B: Gravel areas with no plantings. In areas, such as the vacated alley, we put down plastic and covered it with 3 inches of gravel. Since we have either gravel or mulched beds and a wooden fence, the gravel hasn't been over blown with dirt in 12 years.

C: Shredded bark mulch. In shrub areas and some walking paths, I use landscaping fabric covered with shredded bark mulch. The "shredded" part is important. The ragged edges help bind the mulch preventing it from blowing away.

D) Plant and grass clippings: In the spring, I tend to trim flower stalks left from the previous season and lightly spread them over flower beds. This helps mitigate damage from fluctuating temperatures while allowing light through for early bulbs and ground covers. Later in the season, grass clippings help retain moisture and thwart weeds.

- 7) Regular maintenance: Any landscape benefits from regular maintenance. I regularly walk my yard making sure watering systems are working and weeds aren't taking over. I allow myself time to enjoy my yard without always plucking every weed when I see it! However, I do regular weeding, dividing, and moving of plants. Over the last few years I haven't had to do as much. We haven't exactly achieved a balance, but irrigation is working well, the soil is being improved, and plants are settling in.

Once, a friend said, "A weed wouldn't dare grow here!" I wish that were true. However, regular maintenance is paying off in the long run.

We can have beautiful, water-wise landscapes in Alamosa. For more information, contact me at Marilyn@AlamosaTrees.net or visit AlamosaTrees.net and AlamosaFlowers.net. These non-commercial sites are aimed at promoting trees and flowers in the challenging Alamosa environment.

"My green thumb came only as a result of the mistakes I made while learning to see things from the plant's point of view. " H. Fred Ale