



Waterwise and Climate-wise Shrubs

by Marilyn Loser

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Water administrators are predicting another low-water year for the San Luis Valley (see the Jan. 17 Courier article). While Alamosa is still largely blanketed by snow, my mind sees vast areas of summer green lawns that take an amazing amount of water, time, and money to maintain. Sure, it's easy for developers to slap down a carpet of green – but they don't need to maintain it.

I advocate varying the landscape by including waterwise and climate-wise shrubs. The most prevalent shrubs in Alamosa are Lilacs (*Syringa*), Rocky Mountain Currants (*Grossulariaceas*), native Cinequefoil (*Potentilla*), Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*) and shrub Roses (*Rosa woodsii* – pink, *Rosa ?* – red, *Rosa harrison* – yellow). Once established, all of these do well with some irrigation and maintenance. For photos, take a look at the AlamosaTrees.net Tree Index.

But what else works here? Jim Knopf in “Waterwise Landscaping” says the USDA climate zones are worth little in the west. He says, “It's not so much how cold it gets, but how it gets cold that matters most.” It is sudden freezes late in spring, after lots of warm weather, that regularly destroy fruit tree crops – not mid-winter temperatures.” Also early fall freezes are problematic for plants that depend on gradually cooling weather, rather than shorter day length, to begin dormancy.

So what waterwise shrubs, beyond those listed above, are successful in our area? In the remainder of this article, I'll discuss my experience with deciduous shrubs in our yard. They all receive at least a half day of sun in the summer.

One of my favorite shrubs is the Fernbush (*Chamaebatiaria millefolium*). It's a rapid grower, has delicate whorls of white flowers in summer, and requires little water. I trim the spent flowers. Its fernlike leaves are bluish in color and it needs well-drained soil (no clay).

Rabbitbrush or Chamisa (*Ericameria nauseosus*) is another bluish leafed plant. It has spectacular yellow flowers in late summer, grows fairly rapidly, and thrives in a wide range of soils. It even tolerates alkali. There's a lot of alkali in our area of town. It's easy to identify in open lots during the summer as the ground is covered with a white, chalk-like film.

Growing next to the Chamisa I have Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*). It's not as tall as Chamisa, has darker green leaves, and beautiful white berries in the fall that visiting birds eat. It does sucker and has an irregular growth habit which some people object to. I love it and have it in an area bounded by gravel paths so it doesn't get out of hand. The Sunset Western Garden book gives it a less favorable rating. It states, “Not a first-rate shrub but useful for its tolerance of poor soil, lower light, general neglect.”

I wasn't sure how the three Peking Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster lucidus*) shrubs I planted in one of the most challenging areas of our garden would do. Several years later they are thriving. Not a fast grower, they have dark green, glossy leaves (unlike many low-water shrubs) and I haven't needed to prune them at all. They bear the brunt of southwest cold and drying winds with no ill effects.

My favorite pink-blooming shrubs are from the almond family. By far my favorite is the Rose Tea of China (*Prunus triloba* 'Multiplex'). If the buds don't freeze, it has a spectacular display of double-pink blooms in early spring. I also have a Russian Almond (*Prunus tenella*) that isn't as snowy, but blooms reliably. The flowering almonds are one of the few *Prunus* plants that can be imported into the SLV (Check out trees to avoid at AlamosaTrees.net). Western Sand Cherry (*Prunus besseyi*) and Nanking Cherry (*Prunus tomentosa*) are allowed. Neither has done well for me. They haven't died, but are barely holding on.

Gambel Oak (*Quercus gambelii*) and Buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea*) are doing well. I love the deeply notched leaves of the Oak and the silver leaves of Buffaloberry. I have lost some branches from the oak over the years.

My Mock Orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*) is coming along and has very fragrant blooms in early summer. I haven't had to deal with it specifically, but pull out Meadow Anemones that infringe on its territory.

I've had mixed results with Apache Plume (*Fallugia paradoxa*). It did well for several years and produced wonderful pink feathery blooms. Then, last spring, I had to cut more than half of it back as many branches died. I have no idea why. I'm curious to see how it looks this spring.

While I have a few other shrubs, they are closer to the house and receive more water so aren't listed here.

"If you really think that the environment is less important than the economy, try holding your breath while you count your money." Dr. Guy McPherson