



## Winter Trees and Shrubs

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Winter in Alamosa may not seem like a great time for thinking about your yard and garden. However, your landscape doesn't have to look drab and lifeless in winter. With careful thought and selection of trees and shrubs, it can easily maintain interest throughout the year.

First thoughts usually turn to evergreens, especially on grey days. Just the other day I noticed that our oldest Austrian pine (*Pinus nigra*) is now taller than our two-story house and the other three are looking pretty good.

Our lone ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) always looks a bit undernourished in winter with more brownish needles than I'd like. Unlike my tall Austrian pine that is surrounded by perennial beds, it's in an area of the yard that doesn't get a lot of water. The large ponderosa on Main St. near Safeway only has a small patch of grass now, but when it was growing up at the middle school, it was in a large lawn.

On the other hand, sea green juniper (*Juniperus x media* 'Sea Green') shrub does very well in dry spots in the yard. My largest is at least 6' by 6' and has wonderful green foliage with lots of small, light blue cones (I think of them as berries, but they are officially cones). "The Sunset Western Garden Book" (SWGB) lists the Juniper as growing in zones 1-24 so it's adaptable to many environments, but it doesn't tolerate wet soils.

This season, I used long-needled Austrian pine boughs and juniper boughs from the yard along with fir boughs (trimmed from the Christmas tree we cut up Rock Creek) for making wreaths – a great combination!

Sadly, I haven't had good luck with native pinon pine (*Pinus edulis*) or native Colorado blue spruce (*Picea pungens*) or in our yard. I don't know why my pinon pines didn't make it; it could be our springs are too cold. While searching on the web for "pinon pine range," I came across a peer reviewed map at databasin.org that shows pinons in the mountains surround us, but not along the Rio Grande on the floor of the San Luis Valley.

There are a lot of grand spruces in Alamosa, most of which are growing in lawns. SWGB says it does well in dry soil, but I haven't found that to be the case in the San Luis Valley.

I encourage anyone planning on a spruce tree to provide a wire cage around the tree to protect it from deer for the first 10 years. A few years ago I questioned the Alamosa Parks & Recreation crew as to why they put cages around spruce trees. I thought deer would avoid the bristly needles, but they said no. Just this week, I checked the two 10'-tall spruce in Jardin Hermosa Park in my neighborhood and noticed lower,

broken branches where the deer could reach through the chicken wire. It looks like branches were nipped off and mostly left on the ground. Last year deer didn't tamper with the trees; this year there are already more deer droppings in the park than all of last year. Beats me!

Several web sites list deciduous trees that are of winter interest due to their shape, bark, and/or clinging fruit. Most of them don't grow in Alamosa. I do enjoy crabapples (*Malus*) that hang onto their fruit over the winter; I don't enjoy ones along downtown sidewalks that drop their fruit providing a slimy walk!

Some shrubs and trees provide fruit for birds, especially in the fall. However, some less desirable berries may be eaten in the winter when food is less abundant. The AllAboutBirds.org website lists crabapples, red-osier dogwood (*Cornus*), nannyberry (*Viburnum*), elderberry (*Sambucus*), and juniper as food sources. I've never seen a bird eat juniper berries and any dogwood or nannyberry fruit is long-gone by winter. My elderberry shrubs have never produced fruit.

*“All the complicated details of the attiring and the disattiring are completed!  
A liquid moon moves gently among the long branches.  
Thus having prepared their buds against a sure winter the wise trees stand sleeping in the cold.”*  
William Carlos Williams