



Alamosa Landscapes

Mixed Borders

by Marilyn Loser

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For more than nine years I've been writing columns on Alamosa Trees and Alamosa Flowers. Some topics I've wanted to cover don't fit neatly into one category or the other. Also, so much that we do now in our yards to reduce water consumption fits into the category of hardscape. I consider hardscape to be inorganic elements of a yard such as gravel, rocks, paving stones, concrete, walls, patios, water features, and yard art. Softscape, which I consider to be plants and soil, and hardscape make up our landscapes. Hence, the new column title "Alamosa Landscapes."

A growing trend in recent years is to plant mixed borders, in which flowers are inter-planted with woody plants. Often these borders are next to a garden path, patio, lawn, or driveway.

Some folks feel the rise in popularity is due to the increase in smaller yard size where there isn't enough space for separate beds of shrubs and flowers. However, it could also be the desire to have the feeling of a natural landscape. The Burpee.com website says, "Many gardeners have opted to take their cue from nature, interpreting in the garden the layering tendencies of plants in the wild. If you've ever looked at the area where woods border a field, you've seen these layers – tree canopy, understory trees, shrubs, herbaceous plants, and groundcovers."

A mixed border can provide year around interest with its variety of colors, textures, shapes, and heights. The WhiteFlowerFarm.com website states that mixed borders must be larger than traditional flower beds and that, "Good gardeners almost instinctively think of their borders in terms of three D's: Depth, Density, and Diversity."

Depth refers to both the length from front to back and the layering of short, medium and tall plants. Density means a mass of plants thick and rich enough to satisfy the eye as it wanders over the bed. Diversity implies that a proper mixture of plants provides visual delight for as many months of the years as possible.

In general shorter plants are placed near the front and taller ones near the back if the border is to be viewed from one side. Circular borders have taller plants in the center. Since it is not a formal landscape approach, I think it's best to relax and enjoy a bit of confusion in sizes and shapes.

So what should be planted? The Oregon MountHoodGardens.com website reports that they've practiced the garden style for nearly 25 years. "Small trees, dwarf conifers, and deciduous or evergreen shrubs are combined with dense plantings of suitable perennials and bulbs, to form a harmonious plant community.

Annuals and climbers may also be included. The trees and shrubs provide the structure and vertical elements of the border.

“Perennials, ornamental grasses, and ground covers furnish flower color, later season interest, and the ground layer. The focus is not just on color, but also texture and shape of plants and garden features. Both harmony and contrast, and the balance of the two in a planting, are essential. Dwarf, columnar conifers, and garden ornaments can be focal points.

“Ideally, mixed borders promote year-round interest, but may favor one season, such as summer or fall. Certain plants are repeated throughout the planting area or even the complete garden, and several varieties are used in larger drifts or sweeps.

“This results in visual continuity and moves the eye along the border. The plantings can display an analogous color range, favoring just a few related colors, or present a rainbow of colors, expressed in a polychromatic, joyful color scheme.”

Looking for drought tolerant plants for your border? The Burpee website suggests sun-loving genuses such “*Artemisia*, *Aster*, *Baptisia*, *Campanula*, *Chrysanthemum*, *Coreopsis*, *Echinacea* (coneflower), *Gaillardia* (blanket flower), *Gaura*, *Hemerocallis* (day lilies), *Kniphofia* (red-hot poker), *Lavender*, *Liatris*, *Rudbeckia* (includes gloriosa daisies and black-eyed Susans), *Sedum*, and *Solidago* (golden rod).” Except for lavender (I have only one plant that has lasted for many year), various species of all the others do well in Alamosa.

Saxon Holt’s Photobotanic.com website has a wonderful photo of a meandering gravel path through the mixed border in the Roads Water-smart Garden in the Denver Botanic Garden. <https://photobotanic.com/news/autumn-denver-botanic-garden/>. Take a look. There are a lot of great ideas in just this one photo.

"If you would have a mind at peace, a heart that cannot harden, go find a door that opens wide upon a lovely garden." Unknown