



Alamosa Landscapes

Blowing in the Wind

by Marilyn Loser

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I started thinking about wind tolerant plants even before Monday's gale! Last spring I wrote about wind breaks*. This column will focus on plants for unprotected, windy parts of your garden. While our winds can come from any direction, the most prevailing direction is from the southwest.

Several characteristics make a plant more wind tolerant than other plants. Look for flexible stems, narrow and/or feathery leaves (large leaves act like sails), strong stems, and deep roots like taproots*. Plants with shorter stems tend to fare better as do those that have leaves that can tolerate dry conditions as wind can strip off surface moisture.

If you are planning on buying plants for windy areas, don't reach for the larger ones. You might think your garden will get off to a faster start if you buy larger (and typically more expensive) specimens. The problem with this approach is that larger plants become more top-heavy during the season while anchoring roots are still struggling to get established. Fledgling roots will be pulled about and plants have trouble getting settled. The plant may even fall over when roots can't anchor properly.

So, let's assume you're starting with seeds or small plants. What are some good choices for Alamosa and the San Luis Valley? Note: I usually plant seeds for annuals and perennials that can get established during our short growing season. For the remainder, I buy plants locally.

My picks include Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*) with its feathery gray leaves and long racemes of lavender flowers. It grows 3 – 5 ft. tall in Alamosa and dies back each winter so needs to be trimmed. It is very hardy with strong stems and branches.

The sfgate.com website also suggests the low-maintenance shrubs buffalo berry (*Shepherdia argentea*), juniper (*Juniperus virginiana*), Peking cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster acutifolia*), and fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatic*). I have all four and agree they do fine in the wind. All of these are fairly xeric, have strong stems and branches. Buffalo berry has small, silvery leaves. In drought and wind conditions it shuts off its stoma (the tiny openings through which water vapor passes) helping the plant to retain moisture. There are a lot of junipers around Alamosa.

My cotoneaster and sumac are short (less than 2 ft. tall), compact, and seem to hug the ground. They don't dance around in the wind much. Neither are fast growers in our yard but form low, reliable mounds that spread out slowly and don't let weeds intrude. They require little water.

A couple of other websites suggest mock orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*). Mine is 'Cheyenne' and gets a bit of respite from being near our outdoor greenhouse. I love the fragrant white, spring blossoms.

I get carried away with shrubs as I'm planting more and more as I age. They take less care than bedding plants, annuals from seed, and even perennials! But, I love them all.

I like feathery yarrow -- especially tall, perennial yellow yarrow (such as *Achillea filipendulina*) that grows up to 3 ft. high in my garden and shorter pink yarrow (*Achillea 'Paprika'*). Annual cosmos (*Cosmos* various) come in a variety of colors and have feathery leaves and flexible stems. They reseed freely in our yard.

Shirley poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*), Icelandic poppies (*Papaver nudicaule*), and California poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*) also have feathery leaves and flexible stems. Oriental poppies (*Papaver oriental*), on the other hand, have feathery leaves but stiff stalks and I have had the flowering heads blow over.

Many veronicas (*Veronica* various) and dianthus (*Dianthus* various) have short, needle-like leaves and are short to medium in height. They also have a strong network of roots so they stay put!

Various grasses also work in our windy, cold, arid environment. I don't have much experience with them so left them off of my list of possibilities. Please let me know if you have grasses you love – email me at Marilyn@alamosaflower.net.

REMINDER: Community Seed Exchange is this Saturday (1/26/2019) from 2 to 4 on the first floor of the Adams State University library. Parking is available in the lot to the west – no ticketing on weekends. Bring locally grown and harvested seeds to share.

Information on all of the plants discussed in this column can be found at AlamosaFlowers.net or Alamoatrees.net. All images on the flower website were taken locally in our garden.

*Previous columns/concepts referred to in this article can be found online at AlamosaTrees.net (windbreaks – 2018 Feb. 28 and Mar. 14) or AlamosaFlowers.net (tap roots – 2018 Jun. 27).

"Every gardener knows that under the cloak of winter lies a miracle. Flowers always make people better, happier, and more helpful: they are sunshine, food and medicine to the soul." Luther Burbank