



Alamosa Landscapes

If I Were to Plant a Drought-tolerant Garden - Part 1

by Marilyn Loser

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Our drought continues. In Alamosa, we've had less than 1 inch of precipitation this year – average for this time is about 2.8 inches and we often had good snow pack on the ground the first part of the year. I've seen many predictions of continued drought conditions in our part of the world in the upcoming years. As I wandered our garden this morning, I thought about what I might plant if I were starting a new garden and wanted to focus on drought tolerant plants.

Please be aware that even when a plant is considered drought tolerant you need to water it regularly in the San Luis Valley (SLV) – especially in drought years. It just means you don't need to water them as much as you do plants that prefer moist soil such as perennial tall delphiniums, most showy roses, and sweet William. For this article, I viewed our flower beds that get limited water; that is, not as much as some of the lush flower beds that grow near the house.

Based on what is doing well in our yard right now I would include the plants discussed below in my new garden.

Rocky Mountain penstemon (*Penstemon strictus*): This lovely Colorado native is blue to purple in color and blooms in late spring and summer. It often re-blooms if deadheaded. It does spread some, but is a reliable 1 – 2 ft. tall plant each year. Sometimes I do divide it and replant in other beds, but I haven't had to buy any ones in many years. You often see it along roadsides, even in the San Luis Valley.

Yarrow – pink & red (*Achillea 'Paprika'*), yellow (such as *A. filipendulina*), and not white (*A. millefolium*): Yarrow has feathery foliage. Our paprika plants are 1 – 2 ft. tall and have been blooming since the middle of May and are still looking good. Over the years I've discovered they need less water than I originally thought and only spread gently. Our taller yellow yarrow blooms later in the year and doesn't spread at all. I avoid native white yarrow as it does a great job of taking over a flower bed. I've always loved it in the mountains and acquired some many years ago. It quickly took over the bed and I spent many long hours digging it out. Great tap roots and runners that are hard to totally remove – beware!

Sedum (*Sedum* species), especially yellow groundcover varieties: The types I have bloom in late spring and early summer. They are succulents so store more water than many plants so need infrequent, but deeper water. They have lovely foliage all summer long and are an easy ground cover to maintain.

Blanket flower (*Gaillardia* x *Grandiflora* species): There are more than two dozen species of blanket flower, most of which are native to the Rocky Mountain area. I don't know which ones I planted many years ago, but I have a lot in the garden and they do tend to blanket a garden! However, if you have too many, they are very easy to pull. We have a variety of color mixes include that include red, orange, and yellow hues. They are long blooming, especially if dead headed.

Golden rod – short (*Solidago*): Indeed, golden rod is golden in color. The low type I have grows 4 – 6 in. high. It does well, even in some drier parts of our garden. In well-watered locations, it will spread profusely. Ours has been blooming since early June and looks good to continue through July.

I will discuss the following flowers next time. I'm just listing them here in case you plan to plant this summer. It's time to plant! Baby's breath (creeping - *Gypsophila repens* & regular *Gypsophila paniculata*), corn flower -- perennial knapweed (*Centaurea hypoleuca*), hens and chicks – cold hardy ones (*Sempervivum*), and wormwood – hardy ones (*Artemisa*).

Somewhat drought tolerant flowers that do well in our garden due to deep taproots include columbine (*Aquilegia* species) and mallow - poppy (*Callirhoe involucrate*).

Shrubs that are drought tolerant include rabbitbrush or chamisa (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*), potentilla or cinquefoil (*Potentilla nevadensis*), currant – tall golden (*Grossulariaceae*), and fernbush (*Chamaebatiaria millefolium*).

You can find out more about all of these plants and see photos from our Alamosa garden at AlamosaFlowers.net. I noticed as I was doing research for this column, that some of my online info, especially as to bloom times, needs to be updated. I first entered the data when the plants were new and now have a longer track record of when they actually bloom in Alamosa. I will update in the next week or so!

Stay safe and take care for you and others.

“Flowers are like friends; They bring color to your world.” – Unknown