



Alamosa Landscapes

Favorite Gardening Books

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I have a few flowers left but the garden is definitely getting ready for winter. And so many trees that were brilliantly golden last week have dropped most of their leaves.

I'm not doing much in the garden right now as I'm going to follow the advice of David Salman (chief horticulturist and founder of High Country Gardens in northern New Mexico) and leave my perennials standing in the garden over the winter. He says seed-bearing perennials provide valuable winter food for songbirds. And new to me is the idea that, according to Salman, "Perennials are more cold hardy when their stems are left standing over the winter." He says to wait until mid-spring to cut back perennials, unless a plant is showing signs of disease. I've read his articles over many years and have found his ideas to be well founded.

So, with little to do in the garden, my mind turns to gardening books I've enjoyed over the years. I'm drawn to books that feature low-maintenance, water wise, high altitude, and cold climate gardening.

"Best Perennials for the Rocky Mountains and High Plains" from the Colorado State University Cooperative Extension has been very useful. They discuss plants they've actually grown and monitored over the years, many since 1980. A main section gives plant descriptions for the best performing perennials they've grown. For each they list sun, soil, and moisture conditions; fragrance; usefulness such as ground cover or foliage; if it is native to North America; and whether it is attractive to bees, butterflies, and/or hummingbirds. Sadly, it doesn't list preferred cold-hardiness growing zones. However, whenever I consider a plant, I look up the zone on the internet and only select those that are rated 4 or below. I especially look for zone 1-3 plants.

Sunset's "Low-maintenance Gardening" is very helpful with suggestions for creating a garden you can care for and live with in the western United States. They realize many folks have very busy lives and want to help gardeners avoid pitfalls. They say, "for almost every time-consuming chore, there's an easy-care alternative – whether it be planting smarter, designing better, or watering more efficiently." It has lots of excellent photos of actual gardens and plants.

For example, they discuss the "bones" of the garden. This includes the overall layout but also any structures and the hardscape (paths, decks, walls, etc.) with the goal of creating visual

harmony that doesn't change much over the long run.

They have listings for easy-care shrubs, ground covers, turf grass, ornamental grass, bulbs, succulents, annual flowers, and perennials. And, yes, they list appropriate climate zones!

The "Xeriscape Handbook" by Gayle Weinstein is a how-to guide to natural, resource-wise gardening. While it discusses climate and design, I especially like the chapters on soil, compost, mulch, and fertilizer; planting, health, and maintenance; and applying water.

It suggests getting to know your soil by conducting some exercises on soil texture. For example, in one exercise they have you fill a jar with equal amounts of water and soil. Then you add one teaspoon of dishwashing detergent and shake vigorously. Then you leave it undisturbed for 36 hours. The soil will settle into different layers such as clay particles and silt. Larger particles will settle to the bottom almost immediately. The size of the particles and their proportions determine the soil's ability to retain moisture, air, and nutrients for plant use.

My main go-to book over the years has been the "Sunset Western Garden Book." I have a newer and an older version. The newer one sits right by my desk and the older one rides in the back of my car. I bring the older one out whenever I roam a nursery or plant section of a store. Sadly, due to the coronavirus, it hasn't been out of the car this year! It has excellent descriptions of almost any plant that grows in the western United States.

"Autumn shows us how beautiful it is to let things go." Unknown