



Consider Replacing Some Lawn With Groundcover

by Marilyn Loser

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Water rates have increased and lawns take a lot of maintenance. The 2014 Alamosa water rate is \$1.64 per 1,000 gallons for monthly usage in the 8,001 – 50,000 gallons range. This is 10 cents per 1,000 gallons more than we paid in 2012 and 13 cents less than we'll pay in 2016. By comparison, Denver folk paid \$1.56 per 1,000 gallons back in 1997 according to Jim Knoff in "Water Wise Landscaping."

I remember the Kentucky bluegrass lawns in Denver and Colorado Springs during my college years. They were beautiful, but I don't think vast expanses of bluegrass make much sense in today's water-conscious age. According to Colorado State University's Plant Talk website, bluegrass "grows best on 30 or more inches of moisture a year." That can be as much as two inches per week in many locations. Alamosa gets around 6-8 inches per year.

I love to walk barefoot on nice grass and we have a small patch near the house. However, we have a lot of groundcovers that extend the feeling of open green space and take less water and maintenance once established.

What is groundcover? According to Wikipedia, "Groundcover refers to any plant that grows over an area of ground, used to provide protection from erosion and drought, and to improve its aesthetic appearance (by concealing bare earth)." For a home garden I would add three requirements. Mature height is 18 inches or less, plants are perennials that spread by rhizomes, shoots, or seeds and they form a dense mass.

If planted in weed- and grass-free good soil (a topic for another column), groundcovers need some water and infrequent weeding or trimming. Most of my groundcovers were transplants from friends or nursery purchases.

Naturally, I have some favorites for Alamosa. To see photos of the plants described below, go to the Flower Finder at AlamosaFlower.net and select Groundcover as the Plant Type. The Alamosa Flowers website is now responsive. It should work well on your tablet, cell phone, and desktop computer.

Perhaps one of the easiest to grow is blue-grey Snow in Summer. It has white flowers (which I trim when spent) early in the season, needs little water, does well in a variety of soils, and prefers sun. I love it next to Creeping Phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*) that I have in lavender and pink. They like the same conditions and I like the spiky texture of Phlox next to the softness of Snow in Summer.

If you have some shade, try strawberries. They may not produce a lot of berries in the shade, but the plants are lovely and spread well. For several years I tried them adjacent to the lawn. I loved the green extension of the lawn, but they didn't fare well over the winter in the dry, sunny, and windy location. I

ended up replacing them with Creeping Sedums. Oakleaf Sedum (*Sedum ybridum*) has yellow flowers that turn into rust-colored seed heads. I only trim them at the end of the season.

Dragon's Blood Sedum (*Sedum spurium 'Bronze Carpet'*) is aptly named as it displays burgundy colored leaves similar to the color of the shrub Barberry. Mine doesn't bloom each summer, but when it does it has pink blossoms. I love to mix it with Snow in Summer and California Poppies for the contrast in color and texture. Sedums prefer sun and have done very well in our recent dry winters.

I love various varieties of Creeping Veronica (*Veronica oltensis* & *Veronica thymoides*) and Creeping Thyme (*Thymus 'Pink Chintz'* & *Thymus lanuginosus*). Flowers range from pink to blue. I've found that Veronicas tend to be hardier in my garden. I have them in between pink flagstones. I almost never have to trim them.

Meadow Anemone (*Anemone Canadensis*) continues to delight with its long-lasting white blossoms and bright green foliage. I don't know if others would consider it a groundcover, but I've let it take over around shrubs in one garden bed that receives some shade and is largely protected from southwest winds. It certainly covers the ground! I water it regularly.

If you have a favorite Alamosa groundcover, please let me know at Marilyn@AlamosaFlowers.net.

"Almost any garden, if you see it at just the right moment, can be confused with paradise." Henry Mitchell