



I'm Thinking Red!

by Marilyn Loser

2015 December 16

On gloomy days like we've had recently, I crave color. At night, Alamosa is aglow with Christmas lights, but during the day it's grey and brown. Thank goodness for poinsettias, amaryllis, hibiscus, and geraniums.

A member of the Euphorbia family, poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are native to Mexico. The red 'petals' are actually bracts – specialized leaves at the base of the inconspicuous yellow flowers. They don't do well outside in Alamosa since it is a zone 13 plant and we're zone 3. Some folks place the pots in a cool, dark room or garage after the plants drop their leaves and then place them outside during the summer. Near the end of summer, they re-pot cuttings and begin preparing them to bloom in December. In nature they tend to bloom later as they need many long nights to produce flowers and red bracts. 'Sunset Western Garden Book' says to place the pots in a completely darkened closet for 14 hours each day starting in early October. In the morning, move them to a light spot for no more than 10 hours. Keep this up for 10 weeks. This is why I buy new plants each year!

Amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*) bulbs are often found at garden centers in the fall. These South American natives are easy to grow if you have a warm place (ideally 68 – 70 degrees) to keep them. Often they're already in a pot and all you need to do is water them and watch them grow. Generally they take 7 – 10 weeks to flower. It's not too hard to get an amaryllis to re-bloom. After the plant fades you can cut off the wilted foliage and store the pot in a cool, dark place. I had one bulb that I stuck in our garden storage shed and forgot about. Sometime in November I was looking around for some fertilizer and my hand touched something fleshy. Yes, I screamed. It turned out the bulb developed white leaves about 10 inches long. I brought it in, the leaves greened up, and by Christmas it bloomed again.

We have a small, indoor greenhouse where I keep a few pots over the winter. In late fall, I cut geraniums (*Pelargonium x hortorum*) way back before bringing them in the house. I especially enjoy my red one during December. I've never had pest problems with geraniums. On the other hand, my beautiful red hibiscus (*Hibiscus sp.*) has aphids this winter. I try to get rid of any pests before I bring them in the house. It will be an ongoing battle as I don't like to spray harsh chemicals in the house and it's hard to effectively wash aphids off without splashing water all over the place. I haven't found any of the 'safe' sprays effective. Please contact me (Marilyn@AlamosaFlowers.net) if you know of an effective method.

The four species mentioned above aren't limited to red. They all have hues ranging from white to pink to red with a bit of orange thrown in.

My thoughts drift to my partially snowy yard and red garden flowers. I try to have something red in bloom all season. The first to bloom are creeping red phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*) and tulips (*Tulipa*) during April and May followed by perennial columbines (*Aquilegia Formosa*), shrub roses (*Rosa*), and oriental poppies (*Papaver orientalis*). During June and July annuals start showing off. I tend to buy snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*),

petunia (*Petunia x hybrid*) and zinnia plants from garden centers, but have good luck with reseeding Shirley poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*).

Many gardeners do well with heirloom red roses, but I just have a couple of very hardy climbing specimens. I also have good fortune with perennial dianthus (*Dianthus deltoids*), Maltese cross (*Lychnis chalcedonica*), and paprika yarrow (*Achillea 'Paprika'*) that continue blooming through August and into September. Sadly, I don't fare well with peonies (*Paeonia*) for some reason. Late in the season autumn joy (*Sedum telephium autumn joy*) blooms a light red.

As fall approaches, the red flowers are gone, but my autumn blaze and tatarian maples take over center stage with their beautiful red leaves.

"Who would have thought it possible that a tiny little flower could preoccupy a person so completely that there simply wasn't room for any other thought?" Sophie Scholl