



Matrix Gardening - Part 1

by Marilyn Loser

2016 May 18

I was unfamiliar with the term “Matrix Planting/Gardening” until recently; it popped up when I was researching self-sustaining gardens on the web. Essentially, in gardening, a matrix is the environment in which companion plants thrive to create a mutually supportive community with the focus on attractive rather than food-bearing plants.

OK, that’s a mouthful. The example I could identify with is the High Line Park, an abandoned elevated railway turned into a 1.45 mile-long walking park in New York City that was started in 2006 and was designed by Dutch garden designer and nurseryman Piet Oudolf. According Wikipedia, Oudolf “is a leading figure of the ‘New Perennial’ movement, using bold drifts of herbaceous perennials and grasses which are chosen at least as much for their structure as for their flower colour.” Herbaceous perennials are plants whose growth dies down annually but whose roots or other underground parts survive; around here we typically just use the term perennial.

As I see it, the key elements of Matrix Planting are: masses of ornamental grasses, drifts of brightly colored native flowers, a few large plants scattered throughout, and a large number of smaller groundcover plants. Pathways and hardscape punctuate the visual effect that tries to mimic that found in nature. Most of Oudolf’s designs are of very large spaces reminding me of Colorado mountain meadows in summer or of the English countryside I viewed while drifting down canals.

So what does this have to do with flower gardening in Alamosa? I’m certainly not trying to mimic the natural landscape immediately surrounding Alamosa! And I don’t have a vast expanse of land. However, I’ve been working towards having backyard flower beds that don’t need a lot of maintenance, yet have color, texture, and interest throughout the year.

Two comments capture my attention. “Gardening is a constant negotiation between freedom and control,” states Tom Stuart-Smith in London’s Telegraph newspaper. And the National Design Academy (United Kingdom) website says, “Planting such as this is not maintenance free. But its maintenance needs are less than more regimented designs. What planting like this needs is occasional intelligent intervention rather than constant management. The arrangement of species – not jumbled together any old how but distributed according to their habit of growth and reproduction – allows for change over time, without compromising the character of the plant community.”

As I mentioned in a previous column, I have a flower bed along the entry walkway that has color from April until September and essentially doesn’t require weeding. I pulled one weed last year. I’d like more beds like this! In April and May lavender and bright pink creeping phlox bloom along with purple hyacinths, yellow daffodils, and white-orange jonquils. In late May and June purple thyme, white snow-in-summer, and yellow partridge feather produce flowers. By July the bed is covered with yellow gloriosa daisies and a few yellow Stella d’oro lilies.

I have two others beds that I'm moving in the self-sustaining direction. Our small woodshed garden starts in April with small yellow and purple iris followed by crocuses and grape hyacinths. Then low red tulips and daffodils show up in May. Next, low white alpine asters sprinkle white blooms over the surface. By mid-June low dianthus and taller painted chrysanthemums, columbines, and penstemons steal the show. In July blue tickseed flourish as the columbines and penstemons take a break only to return later in the fall. This bed is next to some lawn and while I thought I'd made a good barrier between the lawn and flower bed, I get grass creeping in that I have to pull out occasionally. I try to do this early in the season as grass greens up before many other plants. This year I need to divide some of the perennials.

My more shaded and protected garden near the house is larger and has a wider variety of species. It also takes more work! Right now tiny lavender bird's eye primrose, red tulips, Icelandic poppies, yellow daffodils, and Johnny jump ups are blooming. Iris, allium, snow-in-summer, and lilies-of-the-valley are about to bloom. June brings a rush of color: orange-red oriental poppies, yellow California poppies, white goat's beard, purple penstemon and lupine, white ox-eyed daisy (on the B noxious weed list), white bishop's weed, and yellow and orange Icelandic poppies are in profusion. Tall purple monk's hood, a variety of delphiniums, golden trollius, and white hydrangea are July highlights.

This is quite a grocery list of plants. My point is to show some examples of gardens that are following the self-sustaining and matrix concepts. My beds differ from matrix plantings since I don't use grasses. I haven't found any low varieties than return yearly, but don't take over. Visit AlamosaFlowers.net to see images of these beds and individual flowers. More on this topic later!

"Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished." Lao Tzu