



## Matrix Gardening - Part 2

by Marilyn Loser

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In the last column I described Matrix Gardening and gave some examples of plants I'm using in my attempt to achieve several self-sustaining flower beds. That column focused on the "what" and this will focus on the "how".

I used to do more annual flower beds. Each year I'd plop in nursery plants and some seeds. I'd have a showy array of blooms from late June until fall and I could carefully control the look. The down side was I'd have to do a lot of weeding until the desired plants took off. Also, there was little color early in the season.

Matrix Gardens and self-sustaining gardens aren't maintenance free or without problems as some folks assume. You need several years to develop a self-sustaining bed of perennials and self-sowing annuals. And they are not for people who want a formal look. "A garden designer has the difficult task of balancing texture, color, and space while simultaneously dealing with the unpredictability of nature," says the rootsimple.com website.

Landscape designer Piet Oudolf's approach is often referred to as "enhanced nature." One problem he ran into with his High Line Park in New York City was that maintenance workers confused plantings for weeds. I'm pretty familiar with the weeds in my garden since I've worked the same ground for more than 30 years. Of course, that doesn't mean new ones don't show up. Last year I had big yellow sow thistle show up in one bed – I'm keeping my eye out for it this year.

In my desire to create a self-sustaining bed, I start with a general plan. I consider the amount of sunlight and water it will receive and quality of the soil. And if there are already flowers doing well, I consider their size, color, and bloom time in order to pick companion plants.

If you're starting from scratch and have a sunny location in Alamosa, consider selecting some plants from the "Hardy Garden" at [AlamosaFlowers.com](http://AlamosaFlowers.com) that lists 25 plants that do well here and provide season long color.

One of the beds I'm working on now has full sun and still tends to be a bit sandy after years of trying to improve the soil. It used to have early yellow buttercups (*Ranunculus acris 'Flore Pleno'*) and yellow/orange Icelandic poppies (*Papaver nudicaule*) followed by sea holly (*Eryngium*), red/pink Shirley poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*), and purple penstemon (*Penstemon strictus*). Over the years the Icelandic poppies and penstemon seemed to diminish so I made sure to resow poppy seeds and to pull out some of the sea holly.

I added grape hyacinths (*Muscari*), red yarrow (*Achillea 'Paprika'*), and May night sage (*Salvia nemorosa*) a couple of years ago for more variety and different textures. I also added some shrubs to add height and to cut down on the yearly maintenance (I find shrubs need less work than perennials): cinquefoil (*Potentilla*), ash-leaf spirea (*Sorbaria sorbifolia*), and red Osier dogwood (*Cornus serica*).

I still have several challenges with the bed. In late May or early June I take a close look and see if I need to rebalance some of the perennials and tackle the bindweed that seems to flourish no matter what I do! Also, there are beautiful wild yellow bush roses (*Rosa ?*) at one end of the bed. After a number of years, they've gotten rather aggressive and through underground runners pop up almost anywhere in the bed. If I were to start over, I would try to contain the roses in their own bed.

Perhaps this bed will never be self-sustaining, but it requires a lot less work than it used to and has pleasing, season-long blooms. I hope you have fun in your garden this summer!

*"My green thumb came only as a result of the mistakes I made while learning to see things from the plant's point of view."* H. Fred Ale