



First Blooms of the Season

by Marilyn Loser

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Hurray for purple Crocus (*Crocus*). It's the first plant to bloom in our garden this year and is displaying four lovely blossoms. I spied the blossoms poking their heads out above the mulch in our protected, south facing garden. It made me feel happy all over. Often, lavender Creeping Phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*) or tiny yellow and purple Iris (*Iris reticulata*) are the first to bloom. Usually something blooms in March. It always gives me hope that spring (and not the wind part) is on its way.

Seeing the blooms encouraged me to get busy in the garden. It didn't hurt that there was very little wind. With all the winter moisture and in spite of recent dry winds, the ground is wet. I mulch garden beds during the winter to help protect them from our crazy weather fluctuations. As those of you who have lived here for some time know, we experience extreme ranges of temperatures, moisture, and wind.

As of Monday afternoon, half the days in March have had temperature swings of more than 40 degrees (all temperatures are in Fahrenheit). In fact three days have had swings of 48 degrees. For example, on Friday, the low was 18 degrees and the high 66 degrees. The newly surfacing green leaves love the high temperatures, but can have trouble adjusting when the evening temperatures plunge below freezing causing moisture in the cells to freeze resulting in burst cells. If temperatures gradually decrease, plants push moisture from the cells; there is less damage if moisture between cells freezes. And, of course, mulch helps mitigate the temperature swings.

Monday, I cut down some of the flower stalks I leave at about 5 inches during the winter (to hold mulch in place) and pulled back some of the winter mulch. Already, green stems and leaves are poking out above the mulch. I loosened the mulch allowing air to circulate and new growth to receive sunlight. This time of the year, it's a hard call to know how much to expose plants. We could still have some cold spells.

I don't fertilize this early in the season, but will keep flower beds moist from here on. We'll probably start up the drip and low-pressure irrigation systems next week. Average low temperatures don't stay above freezing until May in Alamosa according to the Wunderground website, but we haven't had trouble with watering systems if we start them in late March or early April. I'm more worried about drying out plants after Spring officially starts.

Most of our ground covers are cold hardy (zone 3-4) and are greening up, especially in sunny locations and next to dark-colored rocks. These include various Veronicas (*Veronica*), creeping Thymes (*Thymus*), Snow-in-Summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*), Dragon's Blood Sedum (*Sedum spurium 'Bronze Carpet'*), Oakleaf Sedum (*Sedum ybridum*), and Creeping Phlox. Most won't bloom until April or May. While not really a ground cover since it doesn't spread easily, light magenta Bird's Eye Primroses (*Primula*

darialica) start blooming in late March and into April. These little beauties hug the ground, but have been reliable bloomers for years.

Early bulbs are up two-three inches. Purple Grape Hyacinths (*Muscari*) tend to be the earliest bloomers. Also shooting up are various short Tulips (*Tulipa*) and Daffodils (*Narcissus*). As I've mentioned in previous columns, our yard tends to be windy in the spring, so shorter bulbs fare better.

For examples of these plants, take a look at AlamosaFlowers.net. If you're interested in flower gardening in Alamosa, but are concerned about what to plant, take a look at the Hardy Garden tab on the website. It lists various plants that do well here and will give you continuous color from April until August (and perhaps longer depending on the weather).

"If you want to be happy for a short time, get drunk; happy for a long time, fall in love; happy forever, take up gardening." Arthur Smith