



The Challenge of a Beautiful Yard in The Heat

by Marilyn Loser

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The last two weeks of June and the first three weeks of July tend to be the hottest days in Alamosa. Plants and trees seem to wilt, especially if relentless winds kick up in the afternoon. It can be a challenge to sustain a verdant yard without overdoing the watering. With increasing water rates, some folks have just given up on maintaining their yards while others continue pouring on lots of water and perhaps complain about rising costs.

There is a middle way. You can have a lovely yard and minimize water over the long run. Many people, especially in California, have successfully moved away from lawns and towards xeriscaping. Large, green, thirsty lawns are out and low water plants, mulch, and hardscape are in.

However, this change can be hard for those who love vast carpets of green in the neighborhood. I once read an article about a home owner's association that didn't just require residents to have a green lawn; the lawns had to match a certain shade of green printed on a card. Members of the lawn committee would drive around in golf carts and if your lawn color didn't match the appropriate green, you could be fined! I was unable to find the article when I researched this column, but I'm not making this up.

I love to walk barefoot on a lawn; so we still have some near the house. We cut back on the lawn area, allow clover (with white blooms) to grow in the grass, and leave it longer than in the past (at least 3 inches high). Another area is sown with native grasses that we water and cut only occasionally. We also added a flagstone patio in an area that never seemed to get watered properly. The Colorado Springs Utilities website suggests watering in the morning or evening when temperatures are cooler to minimize evaporation.

Our native grass area is adjacent to a rock garden. Both are in full sun and require the same amount of water – much less than most lawns. The rock garden is slowly filling in with perennials – many of which spread nicely. My idea is to have low, easy maintenance plants that provide color throughout most of the gardening season. Anytime I put in a new plant, I add more good soil and water frequently with a watering can the first season while the new plant establishes a good root system. I also strategically place rocks on the southwest side of the plant

to protect it from winter and spring winds. This year I added more oak leaf sedum, dragon's blood sedum, and creeping phlox. Right now the bed is bright with pink dianthus, yellow Marguerite daisies, blue creeping veronica, pink creeping baby's breath, white snow in summer, and yellow sedum.

As the blooms fade, the shape of hens and chicks and the bluish velvety leaves of lamb's ears will become more prominent. A couple of artemisia species will continue to persist giving more bluish highlights in contrast to the green and purples of the other plants.

I'm one of those gardeners who hates naked soil. In the rock garden, I try to cover any with a layer of well matured compost or bark mulch to reduce evaporation from the soil. I use the older stuff as I don't want it to rob nutrients from the underlying soil as fresh compost or mulch might do.

I do like a mixture of plants in a bed. However, if you don't mind allowing just a couple of plants to take over, I have a couple of suggestions. I have creeping buttercups and creeping Charley spreading in areas that get little water. Yes, you could call them invasive, but if you have a constrained area, want attractive plants that stay green all season with little care, these may be the plants for you! There are also a few species of artemisia that do well with little additional water. I don't have the specific names as I was given them. If you'd like some, I'd be happy to share. Email me at Marilyn@ProvisionsByMarilyn.com.

So far, all of the plants I've mentioned are perennials. One of my favorite annuals is the California poppy – I let it have its way in most of my garden. It pops up in many places and some is blooming in beautiful orange now in areas I haven't watered in at least a month. There is a caveat – it sends seeds everywhere and after it blooms, it will die back.

Most of these plants are listed in the index at AlamosaFlowers.net (no ads!). I plan to have photos of the June garden up this week. In a future article I will talk about water wise shrubs and trees.

"Anyone can have dirt. Gardeners have soil." Spanish Proverb