



Colorado Native Shrubs in the Garden

by Marilyn Loser

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I was surprised to find that I've had more than 10 Colorado native shrubs in our garden over the years. Sometimes it's hard to find elevation ranges for plants so I'm grateful to the Colorado State Extension's (CSE) website that lists information such information; all the shrubs below are hardy to at least 7,500 ft. And remember, just because a plant is native to Colorado, it doesn't mean they grow effortlessly in the San Luis Valley!

I'm particularly enjoying buffalo berry (*Shepherdia argentea*) with its small, silver-blue leaves that some websites suggest as an alternative to Russian olive trees, even though they are smaller. Russian olives are no longer encouraged in the state. My original shrub is now over six ft. high and has produced several offspring which I've successfully transplanted to other parts of the yard.

The offspring are probably suckers but they pop up a couple of feet away from the main shrubs so are easy to transplant. They have an erect stature, aren't messy, tolerate alkali soil, and require little water once established.

Three-leaf sumac (*Rhus trilobata*) or skunkbush is a short shrub – one to two ft. high -- in my yard. It has arching branches with glossy green three-part leaves. I think of it as a ground cover; rarely do other plants or weeds pop up underneath it. It requires little water, has tiny yellow flowers in the spring before it leafs out, and has a pleasant light orange fall color.

Pink wood's rose (*Rosa woodsia*) has a special place in a corner of my garden. Many years ago I was able to get some divisions near Trout Creek Pass. They love to form thickets about three-feet tall. They have delicate pink blossoms and require little water once established. I do have to pull up kochia weeds occasionally and try to avoid the thorns when doing so.

There is one heathy Gambel Oak (*Quercus gambelii*) in our yard that is about 8 feet tall and another than hangs on but remains small. I love the shape of the leaves and the shrub reminds me of times in the hills around Colorado Springs and the top of La Veta Pass where they flourish.

I'm fairly new to red-osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*). My two specimens are not as full and beautiful as I'd hoped. As I write one has white buds and the other has leaves opening up and no buds. Both have beautiful red bark. I note that CSE says they require medium to high water. I've tended to give them less and will either have to settle for scragglier plants or give them more water.

Potentilla (or cinquefoil) are a group of perennials and deciduous shrubs. According to “The Sunset Western Garden Book”, shrubby potentillas, most often sold as named forms of *P. Fruticosa*, are native to the Rocky Mountains. They prefer medium water and well-drained soil, but will survive with less water. The hardiest have small yellow flowers. I’ve moved some of mine so that they receive more frequent water.

Rabbitbrush or Chamisa (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*) is very drought tolerant and does well in my garden. It can get to 6 feet high and produces beautiful yellow flowers in late summer. I do trim the spent flower heads. I’ve had volunteers pop up that I replant. One of my favorite stories regarding rabbitbrush -- also called rubber plant -- has to do with the World War II desire to produce more rubber. Acres of rabbitbrush were planted in the Buena Vista area in hopes of creating a commercial crop. Unfortunately, they did not thrive when planted densely so rubber production was not viable.

Most folks in Alamosa are familiar with golden currants (*Ribes aureum*) that seem to grow almost anywhere. As I write, their yellow flowers are apparent all around town. Both people and birds enjoy the fruit. When the fruit ripens near the end of the summer, I often have blue splotches on sidewalks from messy birds dropping the seeds. Birds are the main contributors to the widespread distribution of seeds that quite successfully germinate in our environment.

Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*) has small pink bell-shaped flowers in summer and large white berries in fall that attract birds and small mammals. While not a particularly showy plant, it forms a thicket and is easy to care for.

A number of years ago I had a couple of elderberry shrubs (*Sambucus racemose*), but they died out. According to CSE they require medium to high amounts of water. I’m actually trying again this year with five specimens I got from the spring Colorado Forest Service tree, shrub, and perennial sale. I’ll make sure they’re placed in wetter spots in the yard.

“Hope for the future is at the heart of all gardening.” Marina Schinz