



Tap Rooted Flowers to the Drought Rescue?

by Marilyn Loser

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As those of you who read my column know, our dry, windy, and warm weather over the winter was hard on some of my flower beds. At a recent Perennial Garden Workshop at the North River Greenhouse, I asked Stephanie Coley if there were methods for protecting winter perennials other than mulch. The short answer is, “Yes, water”. Unfortunately, we don’t water in the winter as our watering system isn’t one that can easily be turned on and off in the winter – not as simple as draining a hose.

One lady at the workshop, whose name I failed to get, suggested having a “Water Party”. In response to my quizzical look, she recommended I invite friends over and have them bring a watering can. We could then water critical areas of the garden with water from the kitchen sink. Of course, this should be midday when the sun is shining and it’s above freezing. If we have another dry winter, I will give it a try!

Since most forecasts suggest we’ll probably have drier winters in the near future, I’m rethinking what to plant in my beds that have the most sun and wind.

I’m considering plants with taproots. Taproots are “a primary root that grows vertically downward and gives off small lateral roots” according to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary. Taproots are in contrast to fibrous, branching roots that make a network close to the soil surface. Most plants have one or the other, but some plants combine the two systems.

Carrots and dandelions are two well-known examples of plants with taproots. However, for my flower garden, I’m interested in perennials with taproots. Since a deep taproot helps plants access moisture held in deeper soil layers, they can have better drought resistance compared to fibrous-rooted plants. Further, the taproot acts as an anchor and helps the plant stay put in severe wind conditions.

So what are some examples of taproot flowers that grow in Alamosa?

Columbine (*Aquilegia species*): This might be an example of a plant that combines the two root systems. I try to dig deeply when transplanting, but sometimes break the bottom off of the taproot. Generally, there are enough fibrous roots that help the plant gets reestablished.

Delphinium (*Delphinium species*): I love these tall giants and make sure to protect them from the wind. Several sites say they are hard to transplant as broken taproots don’t seem to recover. With the dry winter, I notice mine will not be as tall as they were in the wet year of 2017.

Poppy Mallow (*Callirhoe involucrate*): I love the magenta color of this five inch high flower in rock gardens. It is easily grown in dry to medium, well-drained soils in full sun. It has a long taproot and gently reseeds. Two survived since last summer and I planted a couple more this spring. At one point I had quite a few in a part of the garden that was overrun by taller flowers that shaded them out.

Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*): I used to have these lovely orange flowering plants and they died. I tried one replacement and it didn't come back the next year. I may try again! My problem may have been that the plants appear later than others and if locations aren't marked and tended, they are often overgrown with Icelandic Poppies or other earlier flowers. Older mature plants have a deep tap root that extends down a foot or more.

Gloriosa Daisy (*Rudbeckia hirta*): This is a showier version of the Black-eyed Susans I see growing along highways – it doesn't seem as scraggly even as those I've seen in wetter climates. I received divisions from a friend many years ago and they do gently reseed. One of my fall gardens used to be covered with them. However, other plants crowded them out and I have fewer this year. Checking online, I see many sites use *hirta* for the common roadside variety while other list *Laciniata*.

Common Bugle (*Ajuga reptans*): Another low grower I once had and loved is this low grower (½ ft. tall in my yard). It likes full sun to part shade and it tolerates rabbit and deer. I'll look for some more; I didn't realize it had a taproot.

Read more about these flowers at the website (without ads) <http://www.alamosaflowers.net> .

Please be aware that perennial taproots take some time to develop so your plants will need regular watering the first few years. They don't glean water as easily as fibrous roots if there is a light rainfall. Also, they are typically harder to transplant as you have to dig deep to get the root without breaking it.

“Flowers... are a proud assertion that a ray of beauty out values all the utilities of the world. “
Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1844