



Alamosa flower gardening is worth the challenge

by Marilyn Loser

Alamosa Flowers

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Flower gardening in the high altitude, desert conditions of the San Luis Valley is a challenge. But it can be done! I'm not abandoning the Alamosa Trees column, but plan to branch out and talk about my first gardening love, Alamosa Flowers.

I've had a flower garden in Alamosa for more than 25 years. While I no longer record bloom times for various flowers each year, I believe this is the earliest I've ever had flowers bloom in our garden. Alamosa's had some record breaking highs this month (for example, 72 on Saturday and 73 on Sunday) and the plants in my warmest flower bed, next to the house on the south side, are awake.

Short, tete-a-tete yellow daffodils, white jonquils with orange centers, creeping lavender phlox, and Alamosa purple hyacinths (so dubbed as they are fairly small and don't resemble the huge, lush ones in flower shops) are blooming -- much to my delight. I live on the west side of town and our yard is windier and cooler than downtown Alamosa. I tend to buy early-blooming bulbs that have flowers on short stalks -- they fare better in the wind and still provide a lot of color.

When I began gardening in Alamosa, it was hard to find information pertinent to flower gardening in our unusual climate. About 10 years ago I started a non-commercial website, AlamosaFlower.net, to chronicle our gardening experiences. All the photos on the website are of our garden so you can see how the plants really look in Alamosa, rather than how they should look according to a glossy catalog.

At the website you can view a flower index or search for plants that meet specific requirements such as color, height, bloom time, zone, soil and sunlight.

Alamosa sits at about 7500 feet, receives 6 – 8 inches of precipitation a year, frequently hits -20 degrees F in the winter and can dip to the -40's. Our frost free dates are traditionally from the first week in June until the middle of September.

Along with the short growing season, daily temperatures can span a 50-degree range (in fact, the Wunderground weather website reported a low of 4 degrees F and a high of 58 on March 5). Oh yeah, spring winds move a lot of real estate around!

I don't have a green thumb, but I do have a persistent one. Our garden has perennials, annuals, shrubs and trees. Many of the perennials and annuals reseed themselves, finding microclimates that better suit them than the original spots where I planted them.

On some of the beautiful days last week I worked in the garden. I've watered trees, shrubs, and beds where earlier blooming flowers tend to grow. I'm cutting down stalks I left over the winter, recycling over-productive seed heads in the city's waste bins and keeping the rest for future mulch. Also, I've been digging errant grass out of flower beds. It tends to green up sooner than most plants so is easy to spot right now.

As I work, I love seeing the new leaves of columbine, Icelandic poppies, veronica ground covers, tulips, flax, penstemon, sea holly, dragon's blood sedum, and dianthus poke up out of the soil. I look forward to the gardening season ahead. My goal is to have something blooming from now until October!

It's too early for me to plant or transplant, but it's a great time to work on the soil and observe the overall garden. Away from the Rio Grande, Alamosa soil tends to lack organic nutrients. I dig in soil conditioner, compost, and mulch (made by chipping-and-shredding garden and vegie kitchen waste). We just don't have deep fertile soil that other parts of North America have.

Also, it's too early for us to start up the drip and low-pressure watering systems at our house. The tubing for our flower-bed irrigation lies on top of the soil so would freeze at night right now. So, I drag hose as I do my first round of spring watering. Really, it's all part of my exercise program.

I look forward to writing about Alamosa Flowers and would love to hear from you about your gardening experiences in the San Luis Valley. You can email me at Marilyn@AlamosaFlowers.net.

"He who is born with a silver spoon in his mouth is generally considered a fortunate person, but his good fortune is small compared to that of the happy mortal who enters this world with a passion for flowers in his soul." - Celia Thaxter