



Native Wildflowers In the Garden

by Marilyn Loser

2012 July 18

I love having native wildflowers in my Alamosa garden. I consider native wildflowers to be flowers native to Colorado (or New Mexico). In my flower-garden lexicon the difference between a wildflower and a weed is whether I want it in my garden. For photos of wildflowers from our garden, visit AlamosaFlowers.net.

For example, I love columbine (aquilegia), penstemon (penstemon), and harebells (campanula rotundifolia) wherever they grow. But white yarrow (achillea millefolium) and butter-and-eggs or yellow toadflax (linaria vulgaris) are great when I'm hiking in the national forest, but a weed in my garden.

Colorado's state flower is the blue and white Rocky Mountain columbine (aquilegia caerulea). The Latin word "aquila" means eagle and refers to the claw-like spurs at the base of the flower. They do very well in the garden as does the smaller red and white Formosa columbine (aquilegia Formosa). About 20 species of columbine are native to North America. I have a variety of colors in my garden. As these perennials gently reseed, I haven't had to plant new ones in eight years. Columbine bloom heavily in May and June and will continue blooming if deadheaded.

The tall racemes of beardstongue, also known as penstemon line Highway 160 as you near Ft. Garland to the east in June and July. Mine are Blue Rocky Mountain penstemon (penstemon strictus) and do well in the xeric garden once established. I deadhead them after blooms fade and they often bloom again later in the summer.

There are more than 200 species of penstemon in western North America. I also have some that bloom pink and magenta; I don't know if they are separate species or evolved from cross breeding. Beardstongue propagates through seeds and root divisions. I occasionally have to dig some out to avoid root compaction which prevents the plants from absorbing enough water.

In July and August, delicate blue harebells adorn the Rocky Mountains from Montana to New Mexico. I have several clumps that expand a bit each year, but I haven't found any new seedlings.

A favorite, early blooming yellow perennial is golden banner or false lupine (thermopsis Montana). If these bloom in my yard, they bloom in late April or early May. I've found that unless we get some good moisture in March or April, they may not even bother to come up. That happened in 2007. However, they were fine in 2008. Even though our past year has been dry, our garden received some good moisture this spring and golden banner bloomed well.

The golden banner plants totally fade away by August. There are a number of wildflowers that behave this way. The plants don't rebloom in the fall; in fact the foliage is gone by the end of summer. An unfortunate consequence of native plant life cycles is that well-intended gardeners plant native flowers, but expect them to be lush all season. As the plants start to fade, gardeners pour on more water. According to one nursery man I spoke with, they actually use more water on their xeric gardens than on a typical garden.

Two other early blooming wildflowers in my garden are white and purple daisies or fleabanes (erigeron flagellaris and compositus). Linnaeus gave the genus its name from the Greek “eri” meaning early plus “geron” meaning old man. The “geron” part may refer to the puffy, grizzled appearance of the mature seed head. Both of these plants are only an inch or so high and blooms are on 1-2 inch stems.

Wildflowers I’m trying to eradicate from my yard are white yarrow and butter-and-eggs. I love seeing white yarrow on rocky mountain slopes when hiking. However, in the garden, it takes over and is difficult to remove. I avoid any wildflower mixes that contain this flower. I stick with non-invasive yellow and pink yarrows.

Butter-and-eggs is actually native to Europe, but is so naturalized in the Rocky Mountains that it seems native. In fact, it was one of the first plants I learned to identify at Girl Scout camp many years ago. I still love the small snapdragon type of flower. Unfortunately, it’s invasive and is on the Colorado noxious weed list.

I did buy mine at a nursery when it was legal to do so. More than 20 years later I ‘m still trying to get rid of it. I do love its relative spurred snapdragon (linaria maroccana) which is an annual, comes in many colors, and grows well from seed.

You can find Colorado native flowers at many nurseries or get perennial cuttings from established gardens. I also buy some seed in bulk via the Internet. If you have questions or comments, email me at Marilyn@AlamosaFlowers.net.

“A flower falls, even though we love it; and a weed grows, even though we do not love it.” Dogen