



Fall Flowers and Bulb Planting

by Marilyn Loser

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2012 Sept 26

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The sun highlights the last bursts of fall color. Yellow Maximilian Sunflowers (*helianthus maximilianii* 'Santa Fe') stand tall at the back border, while the rosy pink blossoms of Autumn Joy Sedum (*sedum telephium*) make a splash at the front. I smile as I look at them, reminded of a friend whose children called them pink broccoli.

Tall clumps of fall asters and Russian Sage are still blooming. The May Night Sage plants I deadheaded earlier have made a return appearance. Sadly, very few penstemons rebloomed this month. The chrysanthemums I planted last fall all returned and are blooming nicely – sometimes they don't come back the following year.

California Poppies still gently wave in the breeze. The ones that bloomed earlier in the season have mostly gone to seed, but these flowers pop up throughout the summer. The later blooming, self-sowing, 6-foot-tall sunflowers are doing well in the vegetable garden. There are still some yellow ones, but rusty-red in the main color right now. The birds have been very happy with the seeds from earlier blooming varieties. The plants look a bit bedraggled, but the birds love them so I leave them standing until the seeds are gone. At least gorging on sunflower seeds doesn't cause the birds to leave as much of a mess as they do when dining on currants and berries!

I have a few large pots and whiskey barrels around the yard that are still ablaze with wave petunias, nasturtiums, and snap dragons. Just being a foot or so above the ground helps them withstand our earliest frosts as long as the frosts aren't too hard.

I cover my tomatoes at night, but hear reports of fellow gardeners who have pulled their plants and hung them upside down in the garage or placed the individual tomatoes in boxes to ripen over the fall. October weather is usually significantly colder than September. According to Wunderground.com, all October average lows are below freezing.

The end of flower season makes me a bit sad. On the bright side, it's time to look ahead to next season and concentrate on spring-blooming bulbs. I think the bulbs in my garden beds are in pretty good shape; I divided quite a few earlier in the summer and replanted them.

However, I have a new area I'm excited about planting – our new native-grass lawn. We decided to replace part of our typical sod lawn with native grasses to reduce water consumption. After a lengthy process of removing the old grass, we enhanced the soil and sowed a mix of native grass seed geared towards elevations above 7,500 – pretty much our elevation. The idea is that at least several will germinate dependent on the planting environment. So far, it's doing well.

The next step is to plant bulbs, especially lower, earlier blooming varieties such as crocus, grape hyacinth, and short tulips. There are areas between the grass clumps. We probably won't mow the native grass too often so I expect the bulbs should do well.

It will soon be time to plant bulbs in Alamosa. According to the Colorado State University Master Gardener (CSUMG) website, you need to “allow ample time for the bulbs to become well rooted before the ground freezes.”

Planting bulbs is different than planting seeds. Bulbs need to be planted at an appropriate depth – typically four times the height of the bulb between soil surface and the tip of the bulb according to CSUMG. This means any soil enhancement needs to be placed in the root zone –four inches below the surface and down.

Bulbs love phosphorus and I had always heard that adding bone meal in the planting zone would provide this element. CSUMG reports, “CSU research has shown that phosphorus from bone meal is only available to plants in soils that have a pH below 7. Bone meal is not regularly recommended for Colorado gardens.” Our soils tend to be alkaline rather than acidic. Consult your favorite garden center for a proper fertilizer with phosphorus.

Make sure the soil isn't compacted and water well to settle the bulbs. CSUMG suggests covering the bed with a 3-inch layer of mulch to prevent alternate freezing and thawing that breaks roots and damages bulbs.

If deer and squirrel visit your garden, you need to take precautions. There are “deer resistant” bulb species, but deer here may not have read the label. And squirrels can be a problem. Apparently, deer don't like crocus, but squirrels do.

Check out the new Alamosa Flowers Blog. It contains all the Valley Courier articles as well as other occasional posts. The blog should adapt to your cell phone or tablet – AlamosaFlowers.net/flower-blog.

“Give me odorous at sunrise a garden of beautiful flowers where I can walk undisturbed.” Walt Whitman in “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun”