



Water Smart Shrubs and Trees

by Marilyn Loser

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Two weeks ago I addressed some challenges of creating a sustainable landscape in Alamosa while reducing water consumption and maintenance costs. I talked about reducing lawn size, adding hardscape, and growing more xeric flowers. This column will focus on water smart shrubs and trees.

If you want a healthy, living landscape in Alamosa, you have to provide supplemental water. Our annual precipitation average is 7.31 inches per year. In 2011, we had only 4.60 inches according to the Wunderground weather site. Last year we had 9.17 inches.

So why have shrubs and trees if it costs money and time? Benefits include cooling in summer, privacy screening, noise reduction, and beauty. Out of July's 31 days, 18 record highs have been set since the turn of the century while only 3 record lows have occurred in the same time period – that's just the last 17 years, folks!

I've not written much about shrubs, but my favorite drought tolerant shrubs are Fern Bush (*Chamaebatiaria millefolium*), Buffalo Berry (*Shepherdia argentea*), native Golden Current (*Grossulariaceae*), Rabbitbrush/Chamisa (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*), Lilac (*Syringa* species), wild yellow/red Roses (*Rosa* ?), and various shapes and sizes of Juniper (*Juniperus* species). I had never heard of Fern Bush until about eight years ago. I love its ferny texture and white flower heads. Mine are now between 5 and 6 feet tall. Native Golden Currant pops up all over Alamosa, but only does well if watered occasionally. I use the currants in relish and pies.

Buffalo Berry has the same silver-blue color of Russian Olives, but is more of a large shrub and doesn't have big berries. Several websites suggest them as an alternative to Russian Olives which can't be sold in Colorado anymore. Mine have gently sent out shoots and I've transplanted these to other areas of the yard and to friends' yards. I have not had to prune them back at all (so far!). Rabbitbrush or Chamisa has grey-green foliage and bright yellow blossoms in the fall. It can get large –which may be just what you want!

Most people in Alamosa are familiar with Lilacs and wild yellow/red Roses. These will also struggle along without much water, but do well with some. One of my favorite 'wild' lilacs was on the west side of the old Safeway store south of the current location on Main Street. I watched it for many years as it provided fragrant spring blooms and green foliage throughout the growing season with no additional water. I marveled at its survival. I received my yellow/red Roses as transplants from friends. I especially enjoy the occasional occurrence of both red and yellow blossoms on a single branch!

Junipers come in all shapes and sizes. I have Blue Rug (*Juniperus horizontalis* 'Wiltonii') and Sea Green (*Juniperus x media* 'Sea Green') that work well as ground covers. They are not on any automatic

drip and I water them about once a month in the summer. I have NEVER had to pull a weed out of them. I only cut back occasional dead growth. I also have some tall Juniper shrubs that are between 6 and 9 feet tall. I just realized I don't know the species names. What I love about them is that they take up a fair amount of area (I have a large yard), don't harbor weeds and provide green color all year. The large Junipers are on a drip system, but don't receive any more direct water than they did 10 years ago. I do give them extra two or three times in the summer.

Trees are so important to our landscape. As I suggested in a previous article (2015 July 29 available at AlamosaTrees.net), choose a medium-sized tree. They require less water and are easier to maintain by the home owner. Most homes in Alamosa are one story so they can be adequately shaded by a medium to small tree.

I encourage you to contact your favorite greenhouse/gardening center and to download State Colorado Forester Keith Wood's "Drought-Tolerant Trees for Colorado Landscapes" at <http://static.colostate.edu/client-files/csfs/pdfs/droughttrees.pdf>.

My favorites on Wood's list of drought-tolerant species are Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*), Honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*), and Kentucky Coffee (*Gymnocladus dioica*). My Hackberry is doing very well. Honeylocust are also doing well around Alamosa. The main reason I don't have one is that they have small leaves that are a mess to clean up. There are a number of Kentucky Coffees in the parking lot on the north side of the Adams State University campus.

Moderately drought-tolerant species on the list that do well in Alamosa include Tatarian Maple (*Acer tataricum*), Crabapples (*Malus*), native Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*), and Amur Maple (*Acer ginnala*).

"Man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself." Rachel Carson