

SPRING PLANTING FOR THE HIGH DESERT

By Diane Hicks

How many times have you heard someone say....."Nothing grows in the desert except tumble weeds, cactus, rocks and lizards." Nothing could be farther from the truth but it does take time. Southern California has perfect weather for some beautiful plants, however; those same plants will not necessarily grow well here. The Las Vegas Valley can experience weather swings from the high 120's to the low 20's. That can mean 100- degree change from mid summer to mid winter, trees, shrubs and plants have a rough time in those kinds of extreme changes.

Our soil is alkaline, rocky, dry and really only good for growing, rocks, cactus, lizards, etc. If you take the time to amend the soil properly you can enjoy great success. Yes, we have beautiful plants that grow well here in the valley. Some of the most beautiful roses I have ever seen are grown right here. As a former board member for a large community I enjoyed being the chairperson for the Landscape Committee. I asked our landscaper to install two rose gardens on the main road in areas where our homeowners could sit and enjoy them. They are beautiful] it just requires some amended soil, Epsom salts, rose- food, proper trimming and water.

For any HOA, one of the largest expense items in the budget will be the landscape maintenance and care of that landscape. Some boards and/or homeowners are not totally aware of the overall impact good landscaping can have on the re-sale value of the entire property. The most important issue for me was that the basic landscape was beautiful, well maintained, properly installed and that what we planted was going to have a good chance at making it through both the winter and the summer.

I discovered that many of the sycamore trees for example, were not meant to be planted in rock-based landscape areas. They suffered from the heat that was not only coming over the top of them but was radiating from the stones below. Replacing trees can be very, very expensive. If those same sycamores had been planted in the lawn area where they had some evaporation and wind movement they would have done so much better. The same is true for shrubs. Making certain that the proper plant is planted in the proper environment makes the difference between a thriving shrub and a shrub that needs to be replaced.

We can have pansies, stocks, dianthus, sunflowers, petunias, cockscomb, primroses and so for and so on. The difference is when we can have them and where we plant them. The other thing to remember is that they are meant to be a 'splash of color' and will have to be replaced with seasonal changes. We can plant all of the above in the fall and they will last for the Winter into the Spring. (The exception would be if we have a particularly hard frost.)

What I have tried to do in the past was to make certain that we had enough perennial plants to keep down the expense of the seasonal changes. Perennials can give a blast of color and remain green for the season. They can produce berries for fall and winter color and food for the birds. The range of Perennial's is quite impressive for this area. The "Eyuonomous" varieties, Myrtles, Lantana and Verbena family are good, but do need to be cut back a bit in the Winter. There are Nandia's, Sages, Rosemary varieties, Trumpet vines, Bank's rose and the like that all do very well here.

And, one more plant that does well here are the bulbs, corms and tubers. You can grow beautiful iris here as well as Crocus, Day lilies, Anemones, Ranunculus, etc., and each year they pop right back up.

The Ethel M cactus garden is a wonderful place to go to see examples of beautiful types of cactus that will grow in our desert. Again, be careful what you plant, some types just do not do well here as we are either too hot or too cold. The Water District is also a good place to go and see what can be done and what looks beautiful in our valley.

It's not Southern California but, if we think about our choices we can have beautiful and happy trees, shrubs and plants. Ask your landscape company where they got their training? What is their success rate? What kind of guarantee are they giving you when they choose the wrong plant and it dies? Have they checked your trees for girding? (This happens when the stakes and ties have been left on too long and are killing the tree by strangulation. When you look at the trees you will see that the ties have actually grown into the tree.) Is there evidence of bores? (When you see sap dripping from the tree or sawdust at the base of the tree you can be pretty sure you have bores. They appear when trees are not healthy.) How can they help to save you money by making certain you have perennials that will survive here? Do they know the proper time of year and proper method for trimming your trees and shrubs?

Take the time to walk your property, look at the health of the landscape and make decisions with your landscaper to have a beautiful and healthy landscape for all to enjoy.

With the drought warnings we all need to be "Water Smart" and "Plant Wise". Please be a good neighbor and community member by watering properly and on the proper days of the week. Seek advice about removing some of the thirsty turf and replace with beautiful groupings of grasses, ground covers, shrubs and some boulders. How about a new low water tree variety to give some extra shade? Some of them are very beautiful and bloom the whole summer long. I have seen water smart yards that are much prettier than the typical grass yard with no variety or variation in plant materials.

We may be in the desert, but just look around at the gorgeous mountains, beautiful sunrise and sunsets that we have here. Plan your garden and yard to reflect that beauty, enjoy the freedom from so much work, watch the water levels rise and your water bill go down.