



The Plant Professionals

Succulents & Cacti

(This material was presented at a succulent seminar at Gill Landscape Nursery by Merlien Wilder on October 1, 2011)

Succulents are native nearly world wide with many from South Africa. They have adapted and thrived in areas of limited rainfall by developing ways to store water in their leaves, stems and roots for long periods of time.

All cacti are succulents, but not all succulents are cacti. Cacti are native from Alaska to Chile. In the United States, Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire are the only states without native cacti. Even Canada can boast of several native cacti that tolerate freezing temperatures.

Succulents require fast draining soil, over watering or soggy soils will kill them. The majority do well in bright shade to full sun (cacti especially like full sun) with moderate temperatures and little fertilizer. They are easy to care for and very undemanding if their minimal requirements are met.

We can easily grow and enjoy a very large number of succulent species in our area. The hard part is choosing which ones from the vast array of appealing structural forms and nearly endless range of leaf and stem colors and textures available. Most have beautiful flowers but are primarily grown for their elegant and interesting structures.

One of the best ways to enjoy them is to create container gardens which can be placed nearly anywhere such as windowsills, patio, porches, decks, or the yard.

The following general method can be used to successfully pot up a container succulent garden.

1. Choose a pot with an adequate drain hole and place a small piece of window screen over the hole.
2. Add a layer of small to medium gravel about one-half to one inch deep in the bottom.
3. Make your planting mix from a 50-50 mix of good quality potting mix such as Landscapers Pride Premium Potting Mix and sharp (coarse) sand. It is important to avoid fluffy potting mixes with lots of peat in them. Also, do not use fine beach sand or play sand. You may add perlite to your mix if you want to increase drainage.
4. Choose your plants (we can help!). Arrange them by placing taller-growing ones near or in the middle and smaller and trailing ones around the edge. Once you like your arrangement, de-pot your plants carefully. Layer in some of your 50-50 mix, place your plants, use the mix to fill in around them and gently firm in without crushing the roots. Leave about one inch of space from the top rim of your container to allow for watering and a decorative top dressing such as coarse sand, decomposed granite or rocks.
5. If your plants are already moist when planted, wait a few days before watering. Although succulents do not require much water (even less in winter months) they do require some. Dry to the touch on top is good, but bone dry deep into the soil is not. Aim for slightly moist to the bottom beneath a drier layer above. Test soil moisture by inserting a dry bamboo skewer or chopstick inside along the container wall. When withdrawn, it will indicate the moisture present. When you water, use a spouted watering can to water slowly and carefully between and around the plants to avoid wetting their foliage. Allow the water to drip from the drain hole. Wait until your moisture test indicates they need watering again. A good rule of thumb is: "When in doubt, don't".
6. Succulents need fertilizer higher in phosphorous. The middle number of the N-P-K labeling on packaged fertilizers will indicate something like: 6-12-6 or 2-7-7. Do not use high nitrogen fertilizers (the first number). Fertilize your new container planting from spring through fall only. Then apply fertilizer at only one-fourth to one-half recommended strength every 2 to 3 months.
7. Place your container in bright shade. Morning sun with afternoon shade is fine especially in summer. For most cacti all day sun is good, but some shade will not harm them. Some succulents such as a Haworthia, Gasteria and Sanseveiria need shade.
8. Monitor your plants regularly for pests such as mealy bugs, snails and ants. Pests are usually rare. Use insecticidal soap sprays for mealy bugs or a dab of rubbing alcohol on a Q-tip. Snails can be hand picked off or you can use snail bait. Ants can be controlled with baits or DE. Elevate your containers whenever possible with pot feet, bricks or another pot turned over underneath to discourage pests and to allow for drainage. If you want to use saucers, be certain to drain them after every watering or rainfall.
9. Bumping a leaf loose or breaking a small plant section off is an easy way to propagate more succulents. It is simple and a great way to have more plants for more containers. Place the leaf on top of some 50-50 mix in all day shade and keep moist all the time. You will likely see a tiny plant growing from the leaf base after a few weeks. It can be potted when a little larger into an individual pot or used to fill a gap in another container. Stem cuttings are the same. Clean a few of the lower leaves from the stem to have a bare section to insert into your mix. Keep very slightly moist in all day shade until rooted. Offsets on your succulent usually grow from the base of certain species and can be cleanly cut away, allowed to dry a couple of days and then potted up.

Follow the few general and simple tips we have offered to easily grow astonishingly beautiful succulent containers. They can be grouped for a luxurious effect, placed near seating outdoors, for intimate little gardens, singular artistic specimens, given as appealing gifts, snipped and shared with neighbors or friends. Experiment, be creative, pass along the fun, beauty and enjoy.

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