

Succulents: An Indoor Garden of Color, Texture and Easy Care



By Dixie Mitchell
March 1, 2013

An indoor garden of color, texture and easy care

In the dark dreary days of winter, the cheery succulent dish garden fulfills our desire for a touch of spring. These tender succulents reward us with textures ranging from fat to frilly to spiny. Others resemble stars, roses, stones or daisies.

Colors span the vivid and pastel hues of sunrise, some with opalescent accents. Rich colors may occur in bright light when watering is kept to a minimum; some even flower in summer.

Succulent dish gardens are ideal for those who are away from home frequently, are housebound, have limited mobility or are pressed for time. They also make great housewarming gifts, and with proper care, can last longer than cut flowers. The best part is that they are easy to care for.

Botanically, cacti are succulents, but not all succulents are cacti. Both are xerophytes, which means they have adapted to survive under a limited water supply with thick, fleshy stems or leaves that are used for storing water.

All they need is a light sprinkling of water each week, bright light and a regular rotation of their containers for even light exposure. Because they do not require the humidity and water needs of most indoor houseplants, keep them away from humidifiers, steamy showers and indoor spas.

Drainage is of utmost importance for good succulent health. This can be accomplished with a drain hole in the base of the container. For a dish or pot having no drain hole, layers of gravel or small stones can work.

In winter, while most xerophytes are in the resting phase of their growing year, keep watering to a minimum and only when soil is completely dry. Over watering can quickly rot roots, so drain any extra water from saucers. Avoid getting the foliage wet; water only the soil. When in doubt, withhold water.

A mulch of fine gravel, small marbles or washed shells placed on the surface of the soil will help keep the plants drier between waterings.

While the origins of dish gardens are somewhat obscure, many garden historians agree that most began as a Japanese artistic hobby. Landscape architects would also use dish gardens as a miniature showcase to display their proposed creations to wealthy clients.

The do-it-yourself succulent dish gardener can use bagged soils formulated for cacti and succulents; these are lighter than potting mixes and contain perlite, which enhances drainage.

In *Designing with Succulents*, Debra Lee Baldwin provides the following proportions for making your own mix:

Mix 1 part perlite or pumice to 5 parts potting soil. (Pumice is recommended as it will not float when watered.)



Above Left: Combining succulents and sedums with a small cactus is an attractive combination for an indoor dish garden. Remember that the cactus must not be overwatered. **Above Right:** The visual reward from planting a variety of tender succulents is unlimited. *Photos by Christine Farrow/ WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

The mobility and versatility of these small gardens allows the indoor gardener to move them to various rooms, to a new residence or even to the outdoors for a summer in bright light.

In early fall, move them to their seasonal indoor home when evening outdoor temperatures start dropping below 50 degrees F.

Don't let the word "dish" dissuade you from planting in other containers; the choices are endless. For example, you can use containers as small as heirloom china cups or bowls, or as large as corrugated metal pipe or concrete drainage pipe. Browse at thrift stores or flea markets for inexpensive containers, unusual "dishes," vintage pots, artisan pots and bonsai pots. Let your imagination express "your inner gardener." But remember: Shallow vessels work best for succulents.

You can also find ready-made succulent dish gardens at local nurseries and chain stores. The components needed to assemble them, such as mulches, plants and soil, are usually included. You can purchase them as is or study them for inspiration.

Succulent dish gardens are just plain good for the home. They filter toxins, give off oxygen and provide a beautiful display of texture and color.

RESOURCES:

- www.bloomiq.com/indoorplanttips/dish-gardens
- *Succulent Container Gardens*. Debra Lee Baldwin, 2010, Timber Press.
- *Terrariums and Miniature Gardens*, a Sunset Book. 1973. Lane Book and Magazine Company