

Hardy Succulents

By Dixie Mitchell

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A variety suited to every home garden in Skagit Valley

Good news! There is a hardy succulent for every Skagit Valley home garden—provided it has the right conditions. Most are evergreen with all season textures and colors. And even some that flower.

The definition of a succulent depends on whether you are a botanist, a horticulturist or a hobbyist. Simply stated, succulents have thick, waxy leaves that have water-saving capabilities.

Perhaps the best well-known succulents are the ones called hens and chicks. The ancient Romans used them to decorate gravesites, believing their ability to endure also hinted at immortality. They are monocarpic plants, meaning that they flower only once and die after setting seed.

The seeds are little offsets, the “chicks.” Attached by slender stems (stolons), they nestle close to the mother plant, eventually form a tight clump of dozens of hens and chicks. They require only 3 to 4 inches of planting medium and grow 1 to 4 inches in height.

- *Sempervivum spp.* is a genus of over 40 species native to rocky areas in southern and central Europe, extending as far as Turkey and the Caucasus Mountains.
- *Jovibarba spp.* is a small genus closely related to sempervivum, native to mountain regions of southeastern Europe. These plants not as robust in wet growing conditions, are tap-rooted and more of a challenge to divide. Two varieties are especially cold tolerant *J. hirta* (to -25F) and *J. sobolifera*, both Russian natives.

Some varieties of sempervivum at first glance look very similar to an artichoke and others appear to be covered by spider-webs. Some have deep burgundy foliage while other varieties sport dark-tipped leaves. Many have brilliant spring colors that fade a bit in summer and then take a rest in winter.

Another dependable succulent is the ice plant (*Delosperma spp.*) that forms a 1 to 2-inch mat of green tentacle-like growth that blooms in shades of pink, red and pale orange in summer. Their native African habitat ranges as far north as Somalia and Yemen.



Photos: Far left - Ice plant (delosperma), Center left – Japanese stonecrop (hylotelephum sieboldii), Center right – Sempervivum (hens and chicks) and delosperma (ice plant), Far right – Sempervivum “hen”
 Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Extension

Sedum spp. is the largest genus of succulents with over 200 Old World choices of foliage in red, yellow, blue, green and deep coral. Some are deciduous while others change color with the seasons, and some have blooms of yellow, pink or white.

- *S. tetractinum* ‘Coral Reef’ (Chinese stonecrop) is a good example of a low-growing, mat-forming ground cover. Grown in full sun, this stonecrop is deep coral, but grown in partial shade, it is green.
- *S. spathulifolium* ‘Cape Blanco’, in colors of pale green or white, is hardy on the cliffs of Deception Pass, with yellow flowers in April.
- Tall autumn blooming varieties of sedum, like ‘Autumn Joy’, attract butterflies and beneficial bees. Its pale green foliage and pink flowers are a garden standout.
- The deep purple foliage and dark pink flowers of ‘Black Jack’ and ‘Xenox’ and the variegated foliage and pale pink flowers of ‘Frosty Morn’ add extraordinary color and texture to any garden.

Sedums make lovely long lasting cut flowers and can be dried for everlasting bouquets. Be aware that deer love these, too!

A former sedum, now classified as *Hylotelephium sieboldii* (but still a hardy succulent), is a native to Japan and China that flowers in fall. It makes a ground cover with long slender succulent stems that emerge from a central rootstock that awakens in late spring. It is a perfect companion to cover dying spring bulb foliage. This plant also works well in a hanging planter by itself.

According to the University of Minnesota, "succulents can be propagated easily by stem cuttings. Many succulents will form new plants from leaves which have been broken off. Allow the cutting wound to air dry before sticking the cutting into slightly moistened, sterile sand. Water sparingly since moisture retention is not a problem. When the roots have formed, transplant into the regular sand and potting soil mixture."

Here is a recipe to provide the ideal growing conditions for succulents:

- Water well for the first year, especially in the hottest, driest part of summer.
- Ensure full sun exposure the entire year.

- Provide drainage, avoiding heavy clay or rich soil by planting in a raised bed, rock garden, or mounded berm. Mix native soils 1:1 with coarse sand. Add rocks and gravel to provide planting pockets, enhance drainage, and reflect sun and warmth in winter months.
- Mulch the bed with 2" of crushed gravel after planting (turkey grit works as well). This helps to keep the leaves dry as they rot when continually exposed to wet conditions.
- Let the surface dry out between waterings or incorporate indicator plants (when these look parched, time to water) such as penstemons or evening primroses.
- Fertilize lightly and only 1-2 times per year, if at all.

Succulents can be used as green roofs requiring only a thin layer of soil and are watered by rain or drip irrigation. Proper installation includes a waterproofing membrane, a thin layer of growing medium, and plants suited to the climate and conditions. Government rebates may be available for properly installed green roofs, which can last, on average, 30 years. Find more information at www.science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/green...green-rooftop.htm

The best news is that nurseries and box stores in the Skagit Valley have an excellent and varied selection of hardy succulents.

Kathy Robinson of Phocas Farms will speak at the monthly Know and Grow, September 17th at 1 p. m. in the Sakuma Auditorium at WSU Mount Vernon Research Center. At her farm between Sequim and Port Angeles, she grows hardy succulents at an elevation of 900 feet. Not only will Kathy share her expertise, experience, and enthusiasm, she will show examples of the many varieties grown on her farm.

RESOURCES:

- *Cacti and Succulents*. Deborah L. Brown. University of Minnesota.
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/horticulture/DG1127.html>
- *Tough Plants for Every Climate: Hardy Succulents*, Owen Moore Kelaidis, Storey Publishing (No date is given - it was printed in China)
- *Cacti and Succulents for Cold Climates*, Leo J. Chance, 2012, Timber Press
- *Succulent Container Gardens*, Debra Lee Baldwin, Timber Press, 2010
- *The Timber Press Guide to Succulent Plants of the World*, Fred Dortort, 2011, Timber Press
- *Designing with Succulents*, Debra Lee Baldwin, 2007, Timber Press