

Growing Succulents in the Pacific Northwest

By Kathy Wolfe
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Stunning and adaptable

Do you have succulent envy? Garden magazines and books contain such beautiful images of succulent gardens whose plants, unfortunately for us, are in much warmer climes. But don't despair! Growing succulents in the Pacific Northwest is doable and, in fact, trendy right now. If you have a bit of knowledge about managing varieties and conditions in your garden, these lovely plants can add versatility and visual punch to your landscape.

Succulent plants are native to arid regions and have adapted to living there by developing fleshy stems, leaves, and roots to store water. Many have waxy leaves, hairy or spiny surfaces, compact columnar or spherical forms, and a reduced leaf surface area to conserve water. Most of these types can be cultivated outdoors in the Pacific Northwest during warm, sunny months and sheltered indoors during cold, wet months. Some can even be grown in shady areas. Many are surprisingly cold-hardy but must be protected from the rain. Others must come indoors due to the cold. There are several varieties that can handle our winters, rainfall (if given excellent drainage) and dry spells. The key is researching closely each plant's requirements before buying, and utilizing it as an annual or perennial, in the ground or in a container.

Basic requirements for all succulent plants include:

- Water thoroughly but infrequently, so roots don't rot. Soil must be nearly dried out between applications. The fatter the succulent (particularly cacti), the less water it will require because it is storing water in its leaves and stems. In winter, when plants go dormant, withhold water unless the days are unseasonably warm.
- Soil must drain well. Amend garden soil and potting mixes 1/3 to 1/2 with perlite or pumice, or use a commercial cactus mix.
- Fertilize only lightly, meaning half-strength fertilizer applied in the spring.
- Sun is important for these plants both inside and out. Give them at least three hours of full sun daily to maintain color and symmetry and to encourage flowering.
- Air circulation is important to prevent insect infestations. Mealy bugs can take up residence in leaf axils, and aphids can reside on flower buds. Control by spraying with diluted rubbing alcohol.
- Temperatures ideally should be between 40 and 80 degrees, although some plants will tolerate a bit more on each end.
- Overwinter plants indoors and provide six hours of light daily (using fluorescent lights, if necessary) to prevent stretching. Store them between 35 and 60 degrees and keep a fan running for circulation. Gradually introduce plants to strong sunlight in the spring to avoid leaf sunburn.



Sedum (stonecrop) trailing varieties can be used for ground covers in rock gardens, terraces and in hanging baskets. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

The best succulents that can handle our Pacific Northwest winters outside include:

- *Sempervivum* (hens and chicks) which spread by producing offshoots from their plump rosettes, forming identical little “chicks” surrounding the mother plant. Breeders have developed over 4,000 named varieties in various renditions of color, rosette form and leaf texture. Color changes with the seasons and star-like flowers appear in summer. They are shallow rooted and are easy to divide and spread throughout your garden. Some thrive in sun and others in shade so be sure to research which goes where.
- *Sedum* (stonecrop) trailing varieties can be used for groundcovers, in rock gardens, terraces and in hanging baskets. Larger-leaved Mexican sedums will not tolerate cold or much dampness and should be overwintered indoors. Shrub sedums die back in winter and return in spring. All produce clusters of star-shaped blooms.
- *Delosperma* (hardy ice plant) has finger shaped leaves and colorful aster-like flowers in bright pink, red and purple. This herbaceous ground cover grows 6” high and spreads to 18”. Its flowers bloom from early summer to frost.

If you are willing to bring your succulent plants indoors for the winter, Debra Lee Baldwin, author of numerous books on succulents and an informative succulent blog, recommends Utah agave (*Amelanchier utahensis*), *Haworthias* (particularly the zebra plant *Haworthia attenuate*) and *Echeveria*.

Interested in seeing for yourself which succulents can thrive in Pacific Northwest gardens? Visit the Skagit County Master Gardener Discovery Garden on Memorial Highway in Mount Vernon to view the wonderful succulent display. You might also check out the Cascade Cactus and Succulent Society of Washington (www.cascadecss.org) for information on their monthly meetings and special events.

Succulents are stunning in bouquets and wreaths, spilling out of mixed succulent containers, used in the front of a border, as an accent in a pot in the landscape, tucked between boulders in a rock garden or in a garden spot too hot or shallow for other plantings. Plan for some in your garden and start exploring a whole new world of possibilities.

RESOURCES:

- “Growing Hardy Succulents: A New Trend.” Marianne C. Ophardt. WSU Extension Faculty, Kennewick, WA. Tri-City Herald. April 25, 2014.
- “Learn About Succulents at the Fair.” Marianne C. Ophardt. WSU Extension Faculty, Kennewick, WA. Tri-City Herald. August 16, 2008.
- “Efficient, elegant succulents are plants Seattleites can use almost anywhere.” Valerie Easton. Seattle Times. September 14, 2008.
- “Surprise! Some Succulents Succeed in Seattle.” Valerie Easton. Seattle Times. August 31, 2016.
- “How to Grow Succulents in Seattle.” Debra Lee Baldwin (debraleebaldwin.com/how-to-grow-succulents-in-Seattle).