

Compelling Small Garden Spaces

While garden spaces vary in styles, plant choices and maintenance demands, they all reflect the personality and lifestyle of the owners. The hope is that the visitor will linger and explore each setting using their senses of sight, smell, touch, hearing and occasionally even taste. Having a focal point may make the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful small garden site.

Planning a Focal Point – "Presentation is all"

There are various routes to creating a small space with a dramatic focal point. An exotic plant, a garden sculpture, an architectural element (such as an urn), plants in unusual combinations of colors and textures can all provide a visual resting place. Containers and hanging baskets offer a movable feast containing a single plant or a lush combination of annuals, perennials, grasses, vines and shrubs. Selecting the most appropriate container is every bit as important as choosing the plant that grows in it.

Containers are made from many different types of materials. Materials such as fiberglass, stone, wood, copper/brass and aluminum have become popular. Clay and plastic are still the old standbys. On the economic side clay is stable, heavy and drains well, while plastic is light, easy to clean, retains moisture and is available in a multitude of colors. Growers can use both successfully.

"In the beginning..."

Succulent is from the Latin succos meaning juice or sap. Succulent plants have evolved fleshy, water-storage tissues in leaves, stems or roots as an environmental adaptation. Succulent plants, having made structural and physiological adaptations, are able to survive, and even thrive, in areas with very little free moisture. Adaptations primarily aim to limit water loss, but also to obtain as much water as possible from the environment.

Succulents grow in shade or hot sunny locations. They will tolerate just about any type of soil, needing only a little topsoil or compost to get them started. They bloom in shades of yellow and pink in summer or fall. Leaves can be white or yellow variegated, burgundy, pink or brown tinged with grey.

Potting Soil and Repotting

Given the wide diversity of succulent plants, there is no one ideal recipe for potting soil, but most of these plants are fairly tolerant. The main features needed are excellent drainage and good aeration, because standing water and a lack of air circulation in the soil are conducive to rot.

Whatever potting soil you choose, it should not have a large proportion of organic amendments such as compost, manure or black earth. Add coarse sand or gravel to increase the soil density in pots where there is a risk of a tall specimen toppling over.

Commercial succulent potting mixes may contain too much organic material and have poor drainage. It is best to amend them with coarse sand, gravel, perlite or pumice. You can also prepare your own soil by mixing 1/3 coarse sand, 1/3 perlite/pumice and 1/3 well-decomposed organic potting soil with a little compost. The medium should be slightly acid, with a pH of 5.5 to 6.5.

Spring is the best time to repot a plant, when it is resuming its active growth. Avoid repotting any plant that is in full bloom. Succulent plants do not require frequent repotting. Repot only when the roots become too tightly packed or every two to three years. Large specimens can be repotted even less frequently. Succulent plants like to be slightly root-bound and so the new pot should be only one size larger. Too large a pot is apt to retain too much water and lead to problems with rot.

Spiny, small plants will be easier to handle if you use kitchen tongs. Use newspaper when handling medium-sized plants. An old blanket or strap will provide protection for larger plants and those handling them. Remove any dead or unhealthy roots.

The container should have at least one drainage hole. Cover the hole, being careful not to block it, with clay potshards or other coarse material. Fill the container with slightly damp soil mix, placing the plant at the same depth as in the original pot. Do not water after repotting; allow the soil to dry out for two to three weeks before watering it. This will give any damaged roots a chance to heal. Avoid placing the plant in full sun for three to four weeks after repotting. Finally, you can top-dress the soil with fine gravel or coarse sand to improve drainage around the collar of the plant.

Watering, how much? "That is the question"

Succulent plants require quite a bit of water in summer. Before watering again the soil should be allowed to dry out almost completely.

Plants grown outdoors in summer will require more water than those kept inside. Never place a saucer under the pot of a plant grown outdoors, for water will pool in the saucer. Succulents standing in water for prolonged periods can mean certain death for the plants. In late summer and early fall, gradually cut back on watering. In late fall and in winter, it is best to allow the plants to go dormant by keeping them dry and cool. Plants kept at temperatures below 50°F in winter may require very little water; this depends somewhat on the temperature and light levels. After a period of dry rest, resume watering gradually. If you grow plants indoors on a windowsill in a heated room, they will require some water during the winter.

Rainwater is preferable to tap water. Rainwater barrels can be fed from house roofs. If mosquitoes are a problem use a few drops of olive oil or light mineral oil to kill the mosquito larvae. Avoid using water straight from the tap as it might contain lime, other salts and additives such as chlorine. These substances can leave white deposits around the spines and base of plants. You can boil tap water or at the very least let the water sit for a few days to release undesirable chemicals, before using on plants.

"Let there be..." A lot of LIGHT

Most succulent plants require bright light. This is why it is best to grow them outdoors in summer. With a few exceptions, mature plants require full sun. A few genera require bright but indirect light. Young plants should be protected from full sun when grown outdoors.

Indoors, plants should be placed in the brightest windows available. Windows that face south or west are the best. Lots of sunshine promotes flowering and prevents plants from becoming "drawn." The light may be too strong for some plants in spring (March-April) and summer, causing foliage to become discolored or scorched. An east-facing window is best at those times. Newly acquired and young plants should be slowly adapted to full sunlight. You can do this by placing them in a shady corner and gradually moving them into sunnier spots (with morning or late-afternoon sun) and finally into full sun after about two weeks. You can also use a double layer of screen material or row cover to filter the sunlight.

Temperature

In summer, optimal growing temperatures are 70° to 80°F, and about 50°F at night. Most succulent plants tolerate both very high (over 100°F) and low (less than 50°F) temperatures. Some can withstand light frost, while others tolerate heavier frost.

In late fall, most succulent plants enter dormancy. To encourage dormancy and the initiation of flower buds, cacti and agaves should be kept cool, between 30°F and 50°F, while other succulents require 50°F to 60°F temperatures. Dormant plants must be kept dry, in a spot with little relative humidity, because the combination of cold and damp is conducive to (guess what) rot.

Fertilizing

Succulent plants require nutrients, but in smaller amounts than most indoor plants. Fertilizer should be applied only in spring and summer, the active growing period. Apply at two- to four-week intervals, using approximately one-quarter to one-half the dosage recommended on the label. No fertilizer is required from mid-September to March.

Succulents may be treated with organic or synthetic fertilizer. Leafy plants, like aloes, require a 20-20-20 type all-purpose fertilizer (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium). Fertilizers used for plants with needles or spines should be low in nitrogen but high in phosphorus and potassium. You can find fertilizers designed for succulents (2-7-7), but formulations like 15-15-30 (tomato food) and 15-30-15 are also fine.

Indoor succulents enjoy being placed outdoors in summer. They will grow more vigorously and accumulate more reserves to keep them healthy indoors over the winter. They can be moved outdoors once nighttime temperatures are above 50°F.

Bring your plants indoors when nighttime temperatures drop to about 45° to 50°F. Very spiny or hairy succulent plants tolerate colder temperatures and can be left outdoors later in the season. Finally, it is a good idea to inspect the plants and soil before bringing them indoors and again two or three weeks later to detect any potential problems.

Success with Succulents – "TO BE OR NOT TO BE..."

- When buying succulents look for plants that show signs of new growth. Avoid unhealthy looking plants as they may be affected by disease or pests.
- Be very careful when handling succulents as they are very sensitive and so are you.
- Take care not to over-water the plants as this causes the roots to rot.

- Use planting soil with good drainage characteristics.

Succulents are an extremely varied group of plants. They come in many exotic shapes, sizes, textures and colors. Here in the Northwest, there are a number of plants to choose from when planning a garden of succulent perennials. In a future article, we will investigate those that are easy to plant and require little maintenance and those that are more difficult and prickly. For a small space focal point there are specimens that are the "Drama Queens" of the plant world.

Resources

Edwards, Irene Editor. *Best of the West*. California: Jan. 2006, 86-103.

Fisher, Sue. *Scented Containers*, New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc. 1999.

[What are Succulents](#). Retrieved February 28, 2002.

[Succulent Plants](#). Retrieved February 28, 2002.