

Bell County Master Gardeners

Tip of the Week

By: Ursula Nanna

On a Mission

A Master Gardener's mission is to educate – usually meaning non-Master Gardeners. But we also educate ourselves by answering a plant question or researching a plant's habits or cultural needs. Along this line, the goal of this desert garden article is to bring cactus and succulent gardening to our area and to raise awareness of these plants' unique benefits.

Way back when...Marlene Gillman gave me my first pups of *Agave Americana* and *Agave Americana variegata*. I quickly learned respect for these plants! One good poke from their spines hurts for days. Shortly after, I was at Fran Idoux's home and saw beautiful cactus gardens (Desert Gardens). She shared *Agave parry* pups and some *Desperadoes paviflora* (salmon *Hesperaloe yucca*). With this material, I made my 1st desert garden. I learned that if anything but cacti – *Opuntia* and *Cylindropuntia* - go into the garden, it is no longer a cactus garden but a Desert Garden. We all learn something new all the time!

Although not a new form of gardening, desert gardening is catching on all over. Gardeners seem to move laterally into new fads as we carry the discoveries of new plants and methods forward. We all now recognize the newer titles: Earthkind, smart gardens, xeriscape gardens, and water-wise gardens to gardening with cacti and succulents.

So what are succulents and what differentiates cacti in this classification? The saying is "all cacti are succulents, but not all succulents are cacti."

Succulents are plants having stems, roots, and leaves of fleshy water-storing tissue. They are found in areas of little to no regular rainfall and their thick, herbaceous stems contain chlorophyll. In the classification of succulents, cacti are the best-known examples of succulents.

Cacti are in the *Cactacea* family and don't have leaves since their spines are considered their leaves. They originated in the Western hemisphere while succulents were found worldwide. These xeriphytic plants are also distinguished from succulents by having areoles producing spines and flowers. Some cacti have very tiny spines, called "glochids," which are almost invisible to the eye and are barbed. They are very difficult to remove from the skin when struck. Cacti are adapted to arid conditions and some to cold or freezing temperatures.

Many cacti and succulents do well in our Central Texas gardens. With water scarcity always a concern, perhaps we will see more Desert Gardens around here! Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com



Desert Garden



Desert Garden raised bed