

Growing Succulents

Succulents are plants which have thickened, fleshy parts used to retain water in arid environments. Gardeners enjoy growing them because of their varied, striking, unusual appearance, as well as their ability to thrive with relatively little care. Many plant families include succulents and some are composed almost completely of succulents. Although growing succulents can be challenging, here are some tips to help you succeed.



Getting a succulent started

A problem succulents struggle with is a soil mix that is too rich in organic matter. Succulents are not cacti with fatter leaves, so they have unique soil needs. Bagged soils labeled for cacti and palms contain a lot of woody material to make it lighter. Unfortunately, the organic matter also makes a comfy place for infectious fungi to grow, which will be problematic for your succulents. Instead, succulents need lean, well-draining soil that is porous enough for water to run nearly straight through it. One way to test that the cactus soil you are considering is good for succulents is to just lift the bag. If it seems heavy for its size, it is a good mix that includes sand and is proper for growing succulents. If the bag seems light, you will need to modify the soil. You can also modify regular potting mixes so they can be used with succulents. These simple steps will help:

- Screen out woody particles from cactus mixes by sifting it through a sheet of $\frac{1}{4}$ inch-grid hardware cloth. This will make it easier to keep from overwatering your succulents.
- Alternatively, you can modify regular potting mixes by mixing sharp or coarse sand (not play sand) with it until you have a 50/50 mix.

If planting your succulent in the ground, choose a protected area and be sure the plants have good air circulation. Succulents need to be in a partially shady area outside as they, like us, get sunburned in full sun. Succulents enjoy the radiant heat from rocks or nearby hardscape in the winter and don't mind it much in the summer.



Succulents can be planted in a pot or bowl; the container is limited only by your imagination and the requirement that your container has a drain. Fill the container about 75% full with soil. Add your succulents and fill in around them with more soil.

Caring for your succulent

Overwatering is one of the biggest problems succulents face and is a major challenge for growers. In their natural environments, succulents have adapted to survive with

very limited water sources, such as mist and dew, so while they do need water, they certainly don't need very much. If growing in a container, be sure the drainage is adequate to deal with our seasonal rainy periods in North Texas.

Because of the lack of organic material in the proper succulent soil, you should fertilize regularly with a low-dose fertilizer during the time of year when the plants are actively growing.

Many gardeners overwinter their containers of tender succulents in a greenhouse or inside their home. Succulents that have a higher cold hardiness can be planted in the ground but there are very few varieties that would survive our winters, so choose carefully. If growing in containers, you can move your potted succulents outside in the summer to decorate patios, walks, and steps and then bring them inside in the winter.

As for pests, mealy bugs are often the pest culprit. Good air circulation by not crowding plants helps or use a systemic houseplant insect control, such as by Bonide, when potting new babies. On the plant itself, spray of 70% isopropyl alcohol and 30% water mixture directly on the bugs.

Note that different succulents go dormant at different times of the year. Some are dormant in the summer, while some wait for winter to move into dormancy. Check out the tables in Resources below for dormancy information.

Propagating succulents

Propagation can be accomplished through seeds, dropped leaves, and stem cuttings. It is not recommended to start succulents from seed as they often do not grow true to their "parent" and are difficult to germinate. Leaf starts are the easiest way to propagate.

Because succulents lose leaves easily just from being handled or moved around, it is simple to use those leaves to start new plants. Dampen soil in a shallow container (a clean takeout container works nicely) with a squirt bottle – the soil should be *damp*, not wet. Set leaves on top of the soil—plain potting soil works at this point. Check the leaves every couple of days and keep the soil *damp* but not wet. You should see new growth from the leaves in three to four weeks. Eventually the original leaf will die off.

When the baby is big enough for you to handle, transplant it to its new home using succulent soil.

Another method of propagation is to take stem cuttings from plants that need a trim. A crucial step with this method is to allow the cutting to form a callus on the cut end by letting it air dry for several days. The end will form a hard covering that will help to avoid rotting when you plant the cutting in soil. Carolyn always

Dip the callus in rooting hormone to help it along, then plant in well-draining soil that keeps damp, but not wet. A spray bottle is ideal for watering succulents of any age. If the cut end does rot, it is easy to cut off the mushy part, allow it to harden again, then dip in rooting hormone and try again.

With so many choices available, you will surely find a succulent to fit a spot in your garden or home!

More information:

“How to care for succulents” <https://agrifetoday.tamu.edu/2020/05/28/how-to-care-for-succulents/>

“Growing succulents” YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TZjWNGP5Mg>

“Tips for Propagating Succulents”: <https://txmg.org/el Paso/learn/gardening-in-el-paso-articles/tips-for-propagating-succulents/>

Succulent Dormancy Tables:

<https://www.succulentsandsunshine.com/succulent-dormancy-table/>

<https://succulentsbox.com/blogs/blog/succulent-dormancy-101>

“Designing with Succulents”: <https://www.gardendesign.com/succulents/containers.html>
<https://thesucculentsource.com/blogs/succulent-cactus-news/a-guide-on-how-to-plant-succulents>

<http://media.huntington.org/ISI/catalogintro.html>

Container Gardening Basics

<https://dcmga.com/north-texas-gardening/community-gardening/container-gardening-basics/>