

Fascinating Flora: *Succulents*



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Discover succulents, and you'll find plants that come in so many colors, that you may feel like a kid in a candy store looking at all the selections available. Appealing to your sense of touch, you'll soon observe leaves with textures that rival the fabric samples from an upholstery shop. Adding to the versatility, many varieties are available that will give your outdoor garden year-round pizzazz, while other potted types can be placed inside your home or on your lanai. If you're a beginning gardener or a frequent traveler, another plus is that these hardy plants can thrive even without receiving regular food or water, making them a breeze to own and love!





When thinking of succulents, since they are plants that store water in their leaves, stems and roots, it may call to mind the image of a cactus. While you would be correct in assuming that all cacti are succulents, not all succulents are cacti, as this diverse family encompasses many more types of plants. Take a closer look and you'll see that there are succulents for all types of growing conditions so finding one you'll love is easy, no matter where you live. According to the Cactus and Succulent Society of America (CSSA), about 20,000 varieties of succulents exist within this extensive family of plants, including resilient types, strong enough to survive freezing temperatures, plus tropical species that are ideal for warmer climates. Additionally, since some outdoor types prefer direct sun, while others grow better in the shade, you will have plenty of colorful options for about any space in your garden.

Selecting a succulent for inside your abode? If so, you will discover many varieties that will thrive there because succulents like the low humidity and warm conditions found in most homes. While they often like direct light, they can adapt to lower light. Since these plants prefer a fast-draining potting medium that's not watered too often, it's best to allow the soil to dry out between waterings.

One of the most popular choices for an indoor plant is the jade (*Crassula ovata*), a long-lived South African native with thick, glossy green leaves, that is known for being easy to grow. Native to Mexico, Burro's Tail (*Sedum morganianum*) is shown to its greatest advantage planted in a hanging basket, where it prefers medium-to-high light for best performance. With a healing sap used for centuries to treat a variety of ailments, an *aloe vera* can be a handy plant to have around; however, since it has sharp edges along the leaf margins, you'll want to place it where it's less likely to be brushed against accidentally. Surprisingly, the Ponytail Palm (*Beaucarnea recurvata*) is also a succulent, one that's ideal for a beginning gardener since it requires minimal watering. Commonly known by colorful names such as the mother-in-law's tongue or St. George's sword, the Snake plant (*Sansevieria trifasciata*) is not only simple to care for; studies have also shown that it can be beneficial in keeping the air in your home clean. Other beautiful options include the Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*), Crown of Thorns (*Euphorbia milii*), Panda Plant (*Kalanchoe tomentosa*), and Pincushion Cactus (*Mammillaria*).

Continued on page 24



The sap of the aloe vera is known for its healing properties

Gardening experts advise that the two plants, *Sempervivum tectorum* or *Echeveria elegans*, which share the same common name, hens-and-chicks, can be used as a houseplant or in the garden, provided they are able to fully dry between waterings. The name, hens-and-chicks, comes from the way that both types produce small, identical plants, known as chicks, that are slightly offset from the parent, or hen, plant. Though they are known by the same term, the two types differ in appearance: while *Echeveria elegans* develops flat, flowerlike rosettes with rounded edges, the rosettes formed by *Sempervivum tectorum* tend to have flatter, more pointed leaves. The two plants also have unique flowering patterns, with *Sempervivum* blooming forth with pink star-shape flowers on plants that die after flowering and *Echeveria* growing smooth, bell-shape blooms every year.

If you are seeking succulents for your garden, the University of Florida IFAS Extension notes that agave (*Agave* spp.) and yucca (*Yucca* spp.) adapt well to home and commercial landscapes, where they thrive in the unique conditions associated with today's urban environments. Given the water restrictions present in many communities within the Sunshine State, interest in these adaptable plants, which originated in dry, hot, sunny, windy environments with low rainfall and poor soil, has increased. In the garden, these characteristics make them low-maintenance options requiring little or no irrigation, fertilizer, pruning, or spraying. Their hardiness makes them invulnerable to most pests and diseases, gives them an enviable tolerance of poor soil, and ensures that they rarely develop nutritional deficiencies.



Agave and yucca make such excellent choices for the garden because, in addition to their innate toughness, they are known for growing into unusual shapes and dramatic, architectural forms. Among the disadvantages, however, are their defensive features that they have developed such as hard, leathery, stiff leaves that may come equipped with barbs, spines or teeth. For this reason, gardeners need to take care around these plants. When you look closer at the agave, you'll find more than 200 additional species with potential landscape use, two of which are native to Florida: false sisal (*Agave decipiens*) and wild century plant (*Agave neglecta*). With yucca, about 20 species exist and the University of Florida advises that the following varieties may definitely be considered native to our state: Spanish bayonet (*Yucca aloifolia*), Adam's needle (*Yucca filamentosa*), and moundlily yucca (*Yucca gloriosa*).

A group of succulents with almost matchless versatility, sedums come in everything from varieties that work well under normal gardening conditions to those that thrive best in drier environments such as Blue Spruce Stonecrop (*Sedum reflexum* 'Blue Spruce') and Chinese Sedum (*Sedum tetractinum*). Gardeners love that there are low-growing kinds that provide excellent ground cover, others that do well in partial shade zones, plus tall types that are useful for planting as back borders. Other bonuses include that they are easy to care for and are good for cut flowers. The Old Farmer's Almanac recommends *Sedum humifusum*, for its good ground cover and beautiful bright yellow flowers, and *Sedum spectabile*, a brilliant variety which will add a bit of bright pink to your garden.

If you want to learn more about these fascinating plants, you may be delighted to find that the CSSA has a local affiliate, the Sarasota Succulent Society & Experimental Gardens. For more information, log on to CSSAinc.org/index.php/work/sarasota-succulent-society-and-experimental-gardens.