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Gardening with Succulents

by Cecile Garrison, UC Master Gardener

I was staring out the kitchen window the other day watching the rain fall and the cold wind blow, when Michelle, the Master Gardener advisor called and pulled me out of my weather imposed funk.

She asked me what I knew about growing succulents in containers. My eyes focused on four large containers at the edge of the patio outside my kitchen window. I told her I knew they were drought tolerant, pest and disease resistant, can tolerate blistering heat in the full sun and freezing temperatures like we have just endured.

Then I went outside and really looked at those containers. The purpose of most containers on a patio is to keep something pretty and in bloom every season. Well, the annuals in those pots had frozen to death, the perennials were deadheaded, dormant, and won't be showing off for another month or two, but the succulents were thriving!

Last spring I stuck cuttings in those pots and they have taken off at an amazing rate! They are multicolored, healthy and vibrant and trailing over the edge exactly like I hoped. Suddenly I realized just how perfect many succulents are for growing in the San Joaquin Valley!

Later that afternoon I took a walk in the cold rain and visited recently planted areas in my yard where I had filled in blank spaces, or tried to camouflage fences, or lined pathways with these succulents. I found them performing well everywhere.

Some were planted in three-inch pockets of soil around my rock waterfall. Others were thriving in shallow pots by the pool where nothing else could withstand the heat in the summer. Then there were the ones I tucked in with summer blooming annuals. The annuals are gone, but the succulents remain.

The black wrought iron fence around the pool looked bare and ugly last spring so I took some succulent cuttings and laid them in a shallow trench the full length of the fence. I covered the cuttings with compost leaving just a little "green" exposed. I patted them down and left them alone without any attention all summer long or during this cold winter except for summer water from the automatic sprinklers. Today on my walk I see that they are twelve inches high and two feet wide and have covered the ground on both sides of the fence. The fence looks great nestled in a bed of green.

Next stops were the internet, the library, and the garden centers that sell succulents. The information was overwhelming! I can remember their common names like Pacific Knight or Gold Nugget but I am still working on trying to remember if they are Crassulas, Echeveria, Kalanchoe, Aloes, etc.

Most succulents have fleshy leaves and stems and can store enough moisture to tolerate our extreme temperatures. They are classified as C4 plants (not C3) which is basically a photosynthesis classification. These plants inhabit hot, dry environments; have very high water-use efficiency, producing almost two times more photosynthesis per ounce of water as C3 plants. They are inefficient in shady or cool environments and less than 1% of the plant species on earth fall into the C4 classification.

The way succulents have evolved provides leaves with a thick, waxy cover that doesn't evaporate water like most leaf blades. They are drought tolerant and do not need that much water to thrive in the first place. They are practically maintenance free. I actually forget about them as I'm tending to the needier roses, annuals and perennials in my gardens.

They thrive in shallow containers of any kind as long as there is adequate drainage and very loose potting soil. You can buy potting soil specifically designed for Cacti and Succulents. I use compost in my containers and add lots of it to the soil when I plant succulents in the ground.

Succulents propagate easily with stem or leaf cuttings and by division. Most of mine were obtained at plant swaps and from family and friends. They are a good groundcover in areas prone to wildfires because they are fire retardant and on slopes provide erosion control.

If you want to learn more about combining succulents in containers and where to use them in your yard, then listen to my Garden Seminar at the Visalia Home and Patio SpringFEST at the Convention Center on Friday, February 12 at 2:00 pm. I'll have a list of succulents I've grown for three years and cuttings to share.

"Growing Vegetables the Square Foot Way" will be presented at our Saturday Seminar (11 am) and on Sunday at 11 am you can get all your questions answered at our "Getting Rid of Weeds" seminar.

The Master Gardeners will staff a booth in the Landscaping Tent all three days of the show. We love to talk to you about gardening. Come be adventurous and start pushing buttons on our IPM Kiosk, an interactive computer program invented by the University of California that provides information to home gardeners about pests in their yards.

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