

Succulent Basics

By Debbie Hager

UCCE El Dorado County Master Gardener

Succulents are the ultimate low maintenance plants and ideal for pots and containers. The collective name for this varied plant group gives the clue to their drought tolerant characteristic: fleshy leaves that hold their own water reservoir. There are an incredible variety of succulents with very strongly defined shapes, textures and colors that offer numerous design possibilities. Many succulents have adapted some amazing shapes and forms in their struggle to survive various environments. Some species of agave, aloe and yucca can be used as dramatic individual plantings, while aeoniums and crassulas are more medium scale shrubs. Dudleya, echeveria, sempervivum and sedum are lower growers and can be used for groundcovers. The possibilities for creative planting combinations are endless.

The culture and care of succulents is low maintenance, but not “no” maintenance. Succulent plants have adapted to environments in which water is unavailable for long periods of time. Much of their uniqueness is related to their relationship with water. Water management is one of the biggest factors in keeping succulents healthy. Succulent plants like to approach dryness before being watered. When watering, water thoroughly, so the water saturates evenly throughout the soil and a small amount of water runs out of the bottom of the pot. Water early in the day to allow the plants time to dry off to prevent rotting and sunburn. Never allow succulents in containers to sit in water.

Whether your succulents are in containers or in the landscape, good drainage and aeration is essential. Amending traditional potting mixes by adding coarse perlite or pumice will generally suffice to make a good succulent mix. The proportion of amendment can be increased for succulents like cacti that need even greater drainage and aeration. There are also potting soil mixtures made specifically for succulents and cactus. Fertilize only once or twice a year in spring or fall and use a low balance fertilizer or fertilizer at half strength. Too much nitrogen can cause softening of tissues and make the plants more susceptible to rot.

The most common succulent pests are aphids and mealybugs. They can be controlled by rinsing the affected areas with water, using neem oil, insecticidal soaps or a squirt bottle filled with rubbing alcohol. A fine, light spray of rubbing alcohol does no damage to succulent leaves and kills the bugs instantly.

Succulent plants tend to like an environment that has good quality sunlight and good air circulation. Growing succulent plants in a few hours of morning sun during the hotter months of the year will allow plants to achieve good color and form without being parched by the heat of the afternoon sun. As a general rule, succulents do not need more than three or four hours of direct sun each day.

Pruning, dividing, transplanting and deadheading apply to succulents as well as other plants. Succulents don't mind crowding as do other plants, however, transplanting a plant that has filled its container will generally allow the plant to experience a new spurt of growth. Some succulents are winter growers and may appear ailing during summer months when they are dormant. Winter growers include senecios, kalanchoes and dudleyas. Avoid excessive watering for these three, especially the dudleyas, which are California natives. For the majority of the succulent family, early summer is a good time to take cuttings, offsets or pups and start propagating new plants. Allow cuttings or offsets (miniatures of the mother plant) to callus over and plant them in well draining soil.

The arrival of winter and impending freezing temperatures means that frost tender succulents, which are the majority, should be brought indoors or otherwise protected.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.

Saturday, July 21st, Master Gardeners will present a free three-hour class on "Vermi-Composting". The class is all about letting worms make compost for you. The class starts at 9:00 a.m. and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr., in Placerville.

Do you have 1-gallon plant containers to recycle? Master Gardeners will gladly take them at the Master Gardener Office. Call before dropping them off and thank you for the donation.