

Succulents Make Great Hostess Gifts

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Nov. 28, 2017

Q: I would like to give a plant as a hostess gift during the holidays. Do you have a suggestion?

A: Yes, you might consider one of the many wonderful succulent plants that have become very popular over the past few years. Succulents are the ultimate low maintenance plants and ideal for pots and containers. I have given a pot of succulents to my most “black thumb” friend and even she managed to keep it alive and looking great for several years. Succulents are drought tolerant with bold fleshy leaves that hold their own water reservoir so they do well with a little neglect. There are many varied varieties 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.



(Photo: Shop Succulents)

Succulents can be given as a houseplant or as an outdoor plant in a decorative pot. If choosing for an indoor pot, then less cold hardy types can be selected such as aeoniums and echeveria.

For outdoor pots or landscape plantings the possibilities for creative planting combinations are endless. For our area choose cold hardy species of agave, aloe and yucca for dramatic individual plantings and crassulas, dudleya, sempervivum and sedum for grouping in pots, beds or as groundcovers.

For friends who have pets there are several succulents that are not toxic to cats or dogs such as blue echeveria, burro's tail or lamb's tail (*Sedum morganianum*), hens and chickens (*sempervivum*) and the pearl plant (*Haworthia margaritifera*).

Water management is one of the biggest factors in keeping succulents healthy. Succulent plants like to approach dryness before being watered. For outdoor pots, pull succulent containers under the porch in the winter so that they do not get too much rain. When watering, it is best to water thoroughly, so the water saturates evenly throughout the soil and a small amount of water runs out of the bottom of the pot and then do not water again until soil is dry. It is good practice to water early in the day to allow the plants time to dry off; this prevents rotting. Never allow succulents in containers to sit in water.

Whether your succulents are in containers inside the house or in the landscape, good drainage and aeration is essential. Most succulents will come potted in well-drained soil but if you plan to transplant into other containers, amend traditional potting mix by adding coarse perlite or pumice to improve drainage. 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.

The culture and care of succulents is low maintenance, but not “no” maintenance. 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 pests of succulents are aphids and mealybugs. They can be controlled by rinsing the pests off with water, spraying with 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.

Succulent plants tend to like an environment that has good quality light, but not too much direct sunlight, and good air circulation. Growing succulent plants where they get only a couple 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.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.