



Aloe



I have always loved having aloe vera in my garden. I love it for its medicinal uses and it is so convenient to have on hand. Traditionally, clear gel from the aloe vera leaves has been applied to the skin to treat wounds, skin infections, burns, and for other skin conditions. Lately, I've been seeing different aloes in the nurseries and buying some of them when I can. Recently, I was surprised to learn that not all aloes are medicinal.

The name aloe is presumed to come from the Arabic word *aloh*, meaning shining bitter substance. There are over 400 species of the genus aloe. They all have rosettes of fleshy

leaves, which may be spined or smooth. The majority have spines. They have tubular shaped flowers, which come in colors ranging from near-white to yellow to orange to near-red; hummingbirds pollinate our garden aloes.

The ranges of sizes vary among the species, from small grass-like aloes, like *aloe descoingsii*, to large tree aloes, like *aloe bainesii*. Most stand perfectly upright while a few creep along the ground. Aloes are often thought to only grow in hot and dry climates but they can actually grow in a variety of climates including desert, grassland, and coastal or even alpine locations.

Aloe vera, unfortunately, doesn't do well in our cold winters. If you grow aloe vera here it's best to bring it inside in the winter. Protection will probably be necessary when the temperatures go below 32°F for longer than a few hours. Unobstructed south facing exposures are always best for maximum winter warmth. *Aloe ferox* is a medicinal aloe that does do well through our winters.

Nearly all aloes prefer fast drainage and plenty of light. For good drainage you can position aloes and other succulents on a raised bed or mound on a slope where drainage is improved. When potted, you can mix lava rock, perlite, or pumice with the soil to improve drainage.

Aloes like sun, but keep them away from harsh reflective surfaces that might burn the leaves when afternoon sun, heat, and poor circulation exist. When transplanting into the ground make sure the soil is fairly dry, that roots are gently loosened to be surrounded by the soil in the planting hole, and then don't water for at least one week afterwards. Fertilize only lightly in mid spring and late summer if the soil is sandy or if grown as a potted plant with balanced liquid fertilizer or slow release pellets.

Pests are rarely a problem, but when they show up it's best not to use harsh chemicals on the succulents' leaves. When growing aloes in pots, transplant them every year or two to refresh the soil and reduce crowding to the roots and from the pups (or offsets, small aloe plants that appear near the base of the mother plant) that may form. Separate any offsets from the mother plant if desired.

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