

Switch on to Succulents

Succulents are proving their worth as house plants, in gardens and in pots because they are perfect for our dryer climate. They come in a wide range of colours and forms and are great value in a garden, providing a sculptural touch. And they flower – and what a range of gorgeous, weird and wonderful flowers they can have. I have to admit that I have come quite late to succulents, but now that I am learning more about them and am growing them myself, I am a true convert.

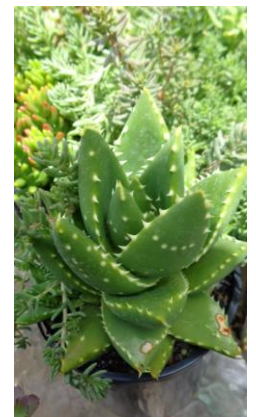


‘Succulent’ describes any plant with thick fleshy leaves or stems. Think of cactus, sedum, crassula, agave, pigface, aloe, echeveria, yucca, kalanchoe, aeonium and you are thinking of succulents. To see an amazing collection of succulents from around the world, visit the Geelong Botanic Gardens where they can be found in the 21st Century garden and at the far end of the gardens near the Pelargonium Collection house.

Succulents have evolved water storage tissues which allow them to grow in situations too dry for most plants. In general, succulents like warmth, low humidity and well drained conditions. They thrive in direct light but can also adapt to low light, which makes them perfect for indoors or under a tree where it is too dry for other ground covers.

While succulents need some moisture, allow the soil to dry out fully before watering. Give frost sensitive species some protection or plant them in pots which can be brought up on to the verandah or moved to a sheltered spot. Don’t over-fertilise – just a little slow release fertiliser or a scattering of compost - treating succulents ‘mean’ will give you the best colour. In my garden, general neglect, other than a tidy up now and then, has kept my succulents (and me) very happy.

There is a succulent for every need – ground cover, clumping, tall, draping, edging, cool colours, warm colours – but, and it is a big but, make sure that you plant them with plants that will like similar conditions. There is no point choosing drought proof plants and then causing them to rot because they get too much moisture when you water their neighbours. Raised beds will enable you to grow succulents in damper, less well-drained areas.



Mass planting in contrasting groups makes a great show of foliage and flower repetition from afar and provides detailed enjoyment close up. *Sedum Autumn Joy* is particularly spectacular with pink blooms in late summer that age to a bronze colour, against beautiful sage green leaves. Other gorgeous sedums are the ground cover *dragons’ blood* – green and maroon leaves which sends up spires of bright cerise flowers in mid-summer and *sedum album*, a low grower with masses of tiny white star flowers touched with shell pink. The latter two have been very popular with children planting fairy gardens, searching for smaller leaves and dainty flowers.



Pots provide lots of scope for a collection of contrasting succulents or for a celebration of one species. I have half barrels with succulents in pots in them laid out like patchwork quilts. Be creative with containers – kitchen ware, baskets, crates, terrariums – just remember the rule about good drainage and either make a drainage hole or be very careful not to over water. Planting taller succulents in containers bonsais them, making them smaller than similar ones in the garden.



You can buy special succulent potting mixes or you can make a gritty 50/50 mix of ordinary potting mix and very coarse sand, crushed rock or gravel. Succulent roots do not take in water from direct contact but absorb moisture from the air, so you need to create a medium which will have air pockets in it. Give potted succulents a drink every week or so in summer and about once a month in winter – check if it is needed first.

Once you start planting succulents, you will notice and appreciate them everywhere and your interest will grow. I am sure that you will have as much pleasure as I have with such easy care and rewarding plants.

Happy gardening!

Christine and Keith Windle, 0403 267 286
info@gardengatenursery.com.au

Garden Gate of Inverleigh www.gardengate.com.au
cnr Winchelsea Rd and McCallum Rd, Inverleigh, 3321