

Succulents

I just realized that in almost four years of writing this column and telling you about all my favorite plants, I've never written about succulents. Succulents are those wildly colorful fleshy-leaved plants that kids find especially fascinating. Technically, all cactus are succulents, but not all succulents are cactus. This month I'm going to concentrate on the ones without spines, partly because I got stuck by a cactus spine last week and since I still haven't been able to remove the spine I'm feeling a little residual resentment.

Succulents are an amazingly varied group of plants, including short and tall groundcovers, trees, shrubs and herbaceous perennials (those are the plants that die to the ground in the fall but come back every year). Succulents come in a rainbow array of colors and patterns that can look like the best of modern art.

This is a case where beauty comes easy—most succulents are not at all difficult to grow.

Even if your thumb is less than green, I'll bet you can be successful with succulents. Just give them well drained soil, (generally) full sun, occasional water and you've got it made. You can grow them in the ground or in a variety of containers. A collection of similar looking containers with a different succulent in each pot makes a simple, effective display. Or get a few larger containers and mix and match several succulents plus a few other perennials for a sophisticated blend.

Succulents are a good choice for green roofs, a location where you want something tough and durable, with low water requirements. If you've been to the SF Flower & Garden Show in the last couple years, you've seen succulents making a dramatic appearance on vertical surfaces as well. In both situations the plants can survive, indeed thrive with a minimum of soil. You can also grow succulents indoors, in a sunny window. In fact, any frost tender succulent, such as *Aloe vera* needs to be brought indoors for the winter, and is quite happy there year 'round.

So, now let me tell you about a few of my favorites, starting with *Sempervivum*, the familiar hen-and-chicks. Most succulents grow in a rosette shape, and semps are a perfect example. They get their name because a large, central rosette is surrounded by baby versions of the central 'hen'. Each of the chicks can be detached and planted, and will, in time, become a hen with it's own

chicks. Sempervivums make an excellent groundcover, growing tight enough together to exclude weeds. *S. arachnoideum* has white hairs that grow from the leaf tips, looking just like cobwebs! *S. 'Sunset'* has bright green leaves with red tips for a dramatic combination. *S. 'Silverine'* is silvery green with a hint of lavender. Some semps are purple, some orange, some fuzzy, some blue. I understand that there are more than 4,000 named varieties, surely something for everyone.

One of my favorite succulents as a child was the donkey tail, *Sedum morganianum*. This plant is one that demands to be grown in a hanging basket, out of harms way. Grown well, it's spectacular, but the leaves break off extremely easily and too many gaps can ruin the effect. This is only one of the many types and forms of sedum that are worth growing. There are a number of little sedums that show off best when grown in and around rocks and crevices, giving them a chance to mound and flow. *S. pachyclados* has green leaves with a blue tint that have tooth marks all along the tip edges. *S. spathulifolium* 'Cape Blanco' has tiny, round-ish leaves that look almost white with a hint of blue. This one is native to the sea coast cliffs of Oregon. And if you want a bright patch of yellow for a slightly shady area (in our warmer parts of South County) look for *S. makinoi* 'Ogon'.

Our final group of hardy succulents are called *Delosperma*. You'll know them as ice plants, but I'm not going to recommend the ones that look like big green French fries! My favorites tend to grow in smaller clumps or mounds, tight and close to the ground. I was introduced to *D. sphalmanthoides* at a rock garden convention, and have loved it ever since. The leaves are blue-gray, the size of very large, plump grains of rice all standing upright. It blooms in spring with startling magenta flowers. *D. basuticum* 'Gold Nugget' has bright green leaves, fat and somewhat triangular in shape. With this ice plant you get shiny, cheerful yellow flowers during the spring/early summer. There is a white version, too, called *D. basuticum* 'White Nugget' that blooms freely.

It's May, so that means it's time to celebrate the opening of the Morgan Hill Farmer's Market on Saturday, May 7th. I hope to see you there!

~Nancy Schramm
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