

the TROPICAL GARDEN



It's Mango Season!



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SUCCULENTS ARE A WAY OF LIFE

Set them up in the right conditions, and cute, tough little succulents will thrive with very little care.

Text and photos by Kenneth Setzer



Succulents! These cute little plants are more popular than ever due to their great variety of shape, color and pattern, plus a reputation for being tough as nails. They have indeed taken advantage of difficult environments to thrive and diversify. You may be surprised to learn that succulents are not a family of related plants; rather they've each developed succulence as a way of life, and their forms reflect this. Their fleshy, stubby leaves can form great mandala rosettes while their (often) short stature adds to their cuteness.

Many succulents are fairly small and compact. Some, like the baobab tree, grow to arborescent heights. These plants have in common the ability to store water in their leaves, stems or roots. Some also engage in CAM photosynthesis, which keeps their stomata closed during hot, dry days. These adaptations make succulents the camels of the plant world. There are different definitions of what qualifies as a succulent, but for this article I'm concentrating on the smallish plants easily kept in pots. While many thrive on neglect, there are steps to ensure their health and longevity.

Soil

Nearly all plants hate wet feet! Succulents' ability to survive drought also means they can't tolerate prolonged wet conditions. For soil, you can buy premixed cactus and succulent mix, or make your own. I mix coconut coir, perlite and a little potting mix. You can recycle the coir used as pot liners by cutting it into small pieces. Unlike peat, coir is renewable, holds some moisture and traps air, drains well and discourages mold growth.

The result should be very coarse soil that holds water long enough for roots to absorb it, but drains fast enough so roots won't rot. It's a good idea to repot newly purchased plants. They are not generally sold in soil good for long-term growth.

Water

Proper watering is crucial for succulent survival. Err on the side of underwatering. Generally, succulents like thorough watering followed by a period during which their soil completely dries. Symptoms of overwatering include blackened, wrinkled, softened areas—particularly in the lower stems, as well as leaves that fall off very easily. Intense summer rains pose a problem for plants that like lots of sun but not lots of water. I move some under a glass patio table during downpours so they get light but are spared the torrent. Too little water results in newer leaves looking wrinkled or crispy, with general lack of growth. However it's normal for older, lower leaves to turn brown and fall off.

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A *Huernia* species—a cascading stem succulent.

TOP: *Fenestraria*, aka baby's toes.

LEFT: The lower leaves of a succulent like this *Echeveria* will naturally brown and fall off as a healthy plant ages. Remove these to promote airflow and encourage propagation.



Light

Perhaps surprisingly, not all succulents need full sun. Certainly, some—like the popular rosettes of blue-green *Echeveria*—need full sun. But many, like *Haworthia*, prefer shade. Here “know what you grow” is important. You’ll need to research your plant to learn its light requirements. However, a sure sign a succulent needs more light is if it grows leggy and looks stretched between leaves. Providing more light won’t reverse that growth pattern; you can keep it as is or cut the top off, let the cut end callus over for a couple days, and replant the cutting into soil. A purple or red plant that reverts to green may also be lacking sunlight. It’s vital to monitor your newer plants, as even the extreme sun lovers can burn in our afternoon summer sun.

Propagation


Making more succulents is so much fun because it’s so easy. Many succulents can grow an entire new plant from a single leaf. Gently twist one off, allow the cut end to callus over and dry for a couple days, then place on a layer of soil or perlite in bright shade. Lightly and regularly mist, and roots followed by leaves may grow from the cutting in the following weeks. Usually plants with thick leaves connected to a stem are best for this, as opposed to *Aloe* for example. Burro’s tail (*Sedum*) propagates nicely from leaf cuttings. *Kalanchoe* species produce ready-rooted offsets along their leaf (more accurately called phylloclades) margins. These pups will drop off on their own.

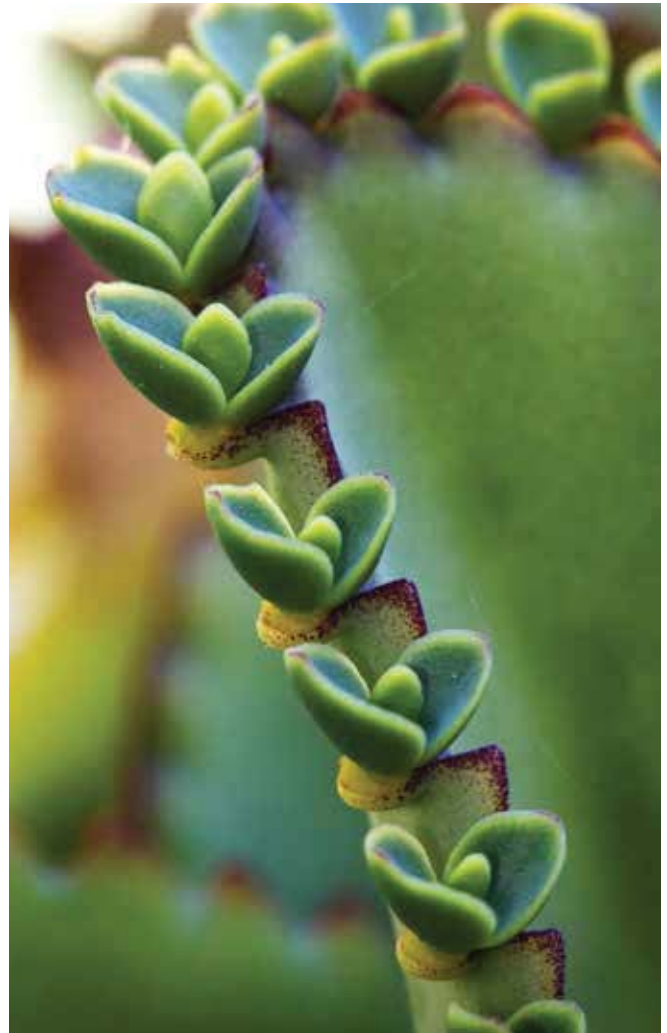
Many succulents produce offsets, called “hen and chicks.” The chicks will appear at the base of the mother plant or horizontally along stolons, and can be left or removed and replanted. From seed is yet another way to propagate, but it can be tricky.

Pots and Surface Dressing

Most succulents have shallow roots, so one can get very creative with pots—just make sure the container has drainage holes. People have grown them in old shoes, in pocket containers on walls or nestled among rocks in a rock garden. Rough-hewn stone, like tufa pots, complements succulents nicely.

A general guide for arranging an assortment is to use a taller plant towards the back, such as a taller *Aloe*, *Euphorbia tirucalli* (aka sticks on fire) or *Portulacaria*. Plant a shorter groundcover filler for the middle, such as *Echeveria*, *Crassula* or *Sempervivum*. Last, plant the front edge with a cascading succulent like the many *Sedum* species. The trick is combining plants with similar light requirements.

Surface coverings of pebbles, aquarium gravel or recycled glass chips help drainage, keep soil in place and are an opportunity to complement or contrast your succulents’ unusual colors. Succulents give us a chance to practically paint and design with plants. Just give them the little care they need, and remember the key to their success: drainage! 



Kalanchoe (above) produces offsets along leaf margins.



Surface dressings like pebbles give a finished look and keep soil in place.