

SUCCULENT BASICS



In recent years succulents have become the new stars of indoor plants. And for good reasons. There are hundreds of varieties to choose from in a wide range of shapes, colors, and textures. They can be dramatic when planted in groups, but many are interesting enough to catch your attention in a pot by themselves. **Most of them thrive in normal home conditions**—dry air and warm temperatures—and require little care. Many are especially forgiving for novices, even if you forget to water them.

5 Easy Varieties

Succulents are unique plants because they have thick, fleshy leaves that store water. Although some succulents may flower occasionally indoors, it is the leaves that are their main attraction. Depending on the variety, succulent foliage may be smooth and rounded, long and prickly, and many different shades of green with hints of blue, purple, or red. Note that all cactuses are succulents, but not all succulents are cactuses. **All succulents store water, but cactuses always have external spines and they never have leaves.** This information focuses on succulents that are not cactuses.

Aloe Vera. This large plant grows as a cluster of long, slender, bright-green leaves on a short stem. Those leaves have prickly spines that can scratch you if you don't handle the plant carefully. Over time, aloe vera produces more clusters of leaves called offsets that can form a colony large enough to fill a whole container. Inside the inner leaves is a sticky sap that's been used for centuries to soothe wounds and burns.

Echeveria. A native of dry climates in the Southwest U.S. and Central America, echeveria grows in a compact rosette shape that makes it look like a low-growing flower. The plump leaves come in a wide range of green hues from bluish to emerald to lime, with red, burgundy, and purple highlights. The plump leaves come to a point on some varieties, while others are rounded.

Jade Plant. Many people are familiar with this classic houseplant, which has stocky, branched stems and thick, glossy green leaves sometimes tinged with red around the edges. Jade plants can reach several feet tall in their native South Africa, but indoors they typically top out at about a foot high. It can become top heavy, so it's best to plant it in a sturdy terra cotta or ceramic pot.

Panda Plant. Among the large and diverse family of the Kalanchoe genus, panda plant sticks out for its soft grayish green, oval-shaped leaves with reddish-brown tips. The leaves have tiny silvery hairs that give it a fuzzy texture. Like many succulents, panda plant is very slow growing, but can eventually reach 2 feet tall indoors.

Zebra Plant. The horizontal stripes on the spiky leaves are the reason for this succulent's common name. It typically grows only about 5 inches tall and about 6 inches wide, so it's a good choice for including in pots of mixed succulents or for terrariums. It fares well with modest amounts of bright light, less than most other common types of succulents.

Buying Tips

Succulents are so popular you'll find them for sale in supermarkets and big box stores as well as nurseries and garden centers. The best place to get one is at a sale hosted by a local grower's group, such as the **Philadelphia Cactus and Succulent Society** (philacactus.org), because you can be sure it has been cared for properly and you can get lots of advice on choosing one for your conditions. Many succulents are so easy to propagate that you often can get a start from a friend or fellow gardener who is already growing them.

If you do buy a succulent from a store, check a couple of things before you purchase.

Dry soil. Soggy soil is deadly to succulents. Be sure the pot has clear drainage holes. Also, the soil should feel dry when you push your finger into it.

Full leaves. The leaves of succulents should be full and kind of plump. Withered, puckered, or droopy foliage is a sign that the plant has not been watered properly.





Secrets To Success

Lots of light. The common succulent varieties are accustomed to bright light but may be scorched by all-day direct sun. About six hours of bright but indirect sunlight is ideal for most of them when grown indoors. South-facing windows tend to be best—just be sure the plants aren't touching the glass, especially during cold months.

Weekly rotations. To keep succulents from growing only on one side, turn the pots each week so that the whole plant gets plenty of light.

Container choices. Grow succulents only in containers with drainage holes that allow excess water to run out. In most cases, terra cotta pots are a better choice than plastic or glazed ceramic options because the unfinished clay dries out more quickly, the conditions that best suit succulents.

Soil selection. Succulents tend to grow naturally in areas where the soil is dry and sandy. To mimic those conditions, use a growing medium that is formulated for succulents and cactuses, sold online and in garden centers. The ideal mix will have coarse sand, pumice stone or perlite, and a small amount of fine bark, peat, or coir (*a by-product of coconut processing*). This mixture drains well and prevents excess moisture from rotting the roots.

Seasonal watering. During the spring and summer, when the plants are actively growing and daylight lasts into the evening, succulents take up more water than they do in the shorter days in fall and winter. **To avoid overwatering**—the most common cause of succulent fatalities—test the soil with your finger first and water only when the top 1 inch or so is fully dry.

Irrigating roots. Moisture that lingers on the foliage of many types of succulents can lead to rotting or moldy leaves. For that reason, don't use a spray bottle to mist succulents. Instead, pour the water directly on the soil or place the pots in a dish of shallow water that can be absorbed through the drainage holes. Once the soil is moist, take it out of the dish.

Skip feeding. Succulents tend to grow naturally in soil that is rich in minerals but low in other types of nutrients. Don't give them fertilizer unless you have a variety that an experienced grower tells you needs to be fed.

Clean routine. Indoor plants may accumulate dust over time, which can inhibit succulents' growth. Every month or so, gently wipe off their leaves with a barely damp cloth to remove the dust and keep your plants healthy and looking their best.

Repot periodically. Succulents have small root systems and grow slowly so they don't need frequent repotting. For most varieties, repot only when the plant has become too large to be stable in its container. Take care in handling the plant as succulent stems and leaves are brittle and can be easily broken.

Propagate easily. Making new succulents is simple with many varieties. You can just snip off the offsets (*or baby plants*) that some types produce. Let the cut end dry out and form a callous. Place it in a pot on top of well-draining succulent soil and wait. In a few weeks, you'll see roots emerging and you can cover them with the soil. You'll know the new one took when it begins to grow again.

Outdoor vacations. If you have a spot where your pots can go outside and get dappled sunlight during the day, they will benefit from the exposure to fresh air and sunshine. Wait to take them out until nighttime temperatures stay consistently above 60 degrees F and bring them back in as overnight temperatures start dropping again the fall. Also, be sure to give your succulents protection from heavy storms when they're outside.

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