

Plants for Indoors

Agave: Spiky rosette of foliage, sometimes variegated. A wide variety of sizes, many suitable as houseplants. Each rosette flowers only once and then dies.

Aloe: Long fleshy leaves grow from base. Juice from leaves of Aloe vera used to soothe minor burns, insect bites and skin irritations. Rarely flowers when grown indoors.

Cactus: There are many varieties available. Pin-cushion cactus (*Mammillaria*) is commonly sold and easily grown. It often flowers when young, with white or pink flowers in a circle around the top of the plant. Notocactus is another type that reliably produces flowers.

Grafted plants are also available that combine two or more varieties on one plant.

Echeveria: Leaves form rosettes in a wide variety of shapes and colors. Also called Hens-and-Chicks but not hardy outdoors in this area.

Euphorbia: Wide variety, many easy to grow. Many look similar to cactus, some grow in rosettes or more unusual shapes, while others have traditional leaves. Sap can be irritating.

Jade Plant (*Crassula*): Bright green waxy leaves. Also available with blue-grey, coppery, or variegated leaves. Tree-like appearance. Grows up to 5' tall.

Living Stones (*Lithops*); Can be challenging to grow but have a unique look. Flowers produced from "crack" in center of plant.

Ponytail Palm: Actually a member of the lily family. Also called elephant's foot. A tree in its native environment, this slow-growing plant can grow to 6' indoors.

Snake Plant (*Sansevieria*): Tolerant, durable houseplant. Rosette of long, erect, strap-like leaves, sometimes variegated.

String-of-pearls (*Senecio rowleyanus*): Tiny spherical leaves on thin stems. Great in hanging baskets. All parts of plant are toxic if ingested.

Other interesting succulents to consider include Aeonium, Haworthia, and Gasteria.

Holiday cactus and kalanchoe are also succulents that can be grown indoors. These two are discussed in our brochure [Beyond Poinsettias - Other Holiday Plants](#).

For more information on gardening please visit:
<http://web.extension.illinois.edu/state/horticulture/index.php>

or

call University of Illinois Extension
Knox County Office
309-342-5108

Other information brochures can be found online at <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/hkmw/hort.html>

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Cactus and Other Succulents



Garden Tips from Knox County Master Gardeners



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What is a Succulent?

The term succulent is not a scientific classification, but a description of a type of plant. Succulents are plants that have adapted to dry conditions by developing the ability to store and conserve water in swollen stems or leaves. Some have small or non-existent leaves, which may fall off during times of water stress. Succulents may also have a hairy or waxy surface to reduce water loss, pores that open at night and close during the day, and spines to protect the plant from predators searching for water. Succulents include a wide variety of plants, of which cactus is just one. Some plants such as begonias have swollen stems, but are usually not included in the discussion of succulents because they are not adapted to dry conditions.

Why Grow Succulents?

Succulents are ideal plants for the busy gardener. Most are easy to grow, with few disease or insect problems, and tolerant of heat, drought, and poor soils. As houseplants, they are well adapted to the warmth and low humidity of the average home. Many are slow growing and will stay in the same pot for years. Potted plants can be moved outdoors in the summer, and many, including a few varieties of cactus, are winter hardy in our area.

Succulents are available in a wide range of shapes, sizes, colors, and textures, and some have spectacular, if sometimes short-lived, flowers. Many provide an option for the gardener who is looking for something dramatic or different. Others, such as sedum, look similar to traditional garden plants and blend into the landscape.

How to Use

Indoors, use succulents in dish gardens, hanging baskets, or in creative containers. If using several varieties, choose plants with similar growth rates and moisture and other cultural requirements.

Outdoors, hardy succulents can be used in dry areas, rock gardens, or in specially prepared beds.

Obtaining

When buying plants, look for a firm base and healthy-looking new growth. Avoid plants with spindly growth or pale leaves, and always check for

insects. Many succulents are also easily started from cuttings obtained from friends or family.

You will sometimes see plants sold in big-box stores and other locations that are not identified by variety. Go ahead and buy if one appeals to you and it looks healthy. Care for most cactus varieties is similar, and it can be fun trying to identify your plant.

Planting

When planting in containers, don't choose too large a pot - most succulents do best in a smaller amount of soil. Use a soil mixture with good drainage. For cactus and similar plants, use a cactus soil mix or one part each potting soil and coarse sand. Use care when handling plants with spines. Keep newly potted cactus plants dry for a week or two to allow damaged root surfaces to heal and prevent rot.

Outdoors, choose a spot with excellent drainage in full or part sun. For cactus, you can add up to 50% coarse sand to good garden soil.

Care

Locate pots in a bright sunny location indoors. Place in a shady, sheltered spot when moving outdoors in the summer and gradually acclimate to more sun.

All cactus and most other succulents will not tolerate wet feet. They require excellent drainage and should be allowed to dry out between waterings. Try to keep water off leaves and base of plant when watering. Consider planting outdoor cactus on a small berm or raised bed.

Most succulents require little if any fertilization. Excess fertilizer will promote weak growth that is vulnerable to insects and diseases.

Most succulents grow in response to warm temperatures and moisture, and become dormant in cool, dry conditions (usually fall and winter). Cool temperatures will help initiate blooming. Do not fertilize dormant plants, and water only enough to prevent withering.

Always wear heavy gloves and use care when working around plants with sharp spines.

Most potential problems can be prevented with good growing conditions - bright light, proper watering, and good air circulation.

With so many different varieties available, it's difficult to give general care instructions. Refer to instructions for your specific plant.

Choosing

Some plants have sharp thorns or barbs. You might want to consider something a little more user-friendly if you have small children or pets (and they're easier to work with too!)

Many cactus only bloom after they reach a mature size and then only if all cultural requirements are met. Consider flowers an added bonus and choose plants that look good all year long.

The following are just a few of the many types of succulents available. Many require similar care, so, if you see something you like, give it a try!

Perennials for Outdoor Planting

Sedums: Come in both upright and spreading forms. Fleshy leaves in a variety of colors, often variegated. Produce clusters of small flowers in a many colors in summer or fall, depending on variety. Seed heads provide winter interest.

Hens and Chicks (*Sempervivum*): Name comes from the appearance of a large mother plant surrounded by smaller offshoots. Green or red foliage forms a 2-4" rosette. Rarely bloom, flowering rosette will die after setting seed.

Yucca: Green or variegated foliage forms a spiky mound 2-3' tall. Produces a tall stalk of waxy white bell-shaped flowers in summer.

Cactus: Eastern prickly pear (*Opuntia humifusa*) is relatively easy to find and is native to Illinois. Round flat pads with spines form low spreading mounds, producing large yellow flowers in summer. Other *Opuntia* varieties offer orange, red, and pink blooms. Produces edible red or purple fruit.

There are other species of cactus that are hardy in Illinois. Many cactus can tolerate cold but will be killed by wet conditions in winter.

Ice Plant (*Delosperma*): Daisy-like colorful flowers. Not reliably hardy - must be protected from winter moisture.

Companion Plants: A group of cactus can look a bit out of place in a midwestern yard. You may want that desert look but, if you want to help plants blend in with the rest of your landscape, choose plants that thrive in similar conditions. A few to consider are lavender and other herbs, native grasses, California poppy, Russian sage, and rock garden plants.