

Succulent Care

Donna Dillon, Alameda County Master Gardener

Succulents are an amazing addition to a garden. Their shapes, colors, flowers and textures provide variety in a planting bed or containers. They are forgiving plants.



Succulents provide bold shapes and colors in pots.
Photo by Donna Dillon

However, even though they are durable and tough, they still need some attention once or twice a year. They don't come from deserts; they come from semi-arid regions with irregular rainfall—that's what makes them great in Bay Area gardens and what to keep in mind as you maintain your plants.

This winter, the best thing you can do is to protect your succulents from frost. If your plants are in containers, move them under a tree or under the eaves of your house. Those that are in the ground can be protected with a covering no heavier than the weight of a sheet (be sure to remove the sheet in the morning so that no moisture is trapped underneath as this could cause disease or pest problems). Keep them on the dry side. When the plants freeze, the cells that help them hold water tend to burst and turn the plant to mush. One of the trickiest times for succulents is to have a freeze after a hard rain. This is when

you will need to be vigilant. Protect them from hail. Hail damage to the soft leaves remains visible for months or years.

Come spring, when you see that the plants are showing signs of growth (and not before), feed your plants with a slow release fertilizer or with a ½ dose of fertilizer. Remove dead leaves from the base of the plant and remove dirt and fallen leaves that have fallen into the plant (kitchen tongs or tweezers work well). If your plants have spines that might hurt someone, cut them off. Watch for snails which also cause long lasting damage. Stay on top of weeds as they emerge. In some cases, especially if you are dealing with oxalis, you might have to wash away the old soil and start again with a new soil mix.

You need to decide whether you want pups near your original plant or whether you want to develop the main plant. You can give away the pups or offshoots or start more in another location. You might even have to behead a leggy succulent. Let the top sit in the open air for a few weeks and then start it again in your bed. You can remove the old stem and repot it and watch it. It may produce new offshoots. Spring is also the best time to repot your plants and make sure the soil is still providing your plant with nutrients. You don't need a special cactus soil mix, but it helps to balance a potting mix with pumice. Most feed stores sell a product called Dry Stall, which is pumice. Use a mix that is half soil and half pumice for most succulents. This mix could be 25 percent soil and 75 percent pumice with more fleshy plants. Do not put crockery in the bottom of the pot as this can block drainage and introduce rot.

In the summer, watch your succulents and protect them from sunburn. A plant that looks unhappy, blemished or burned at the tips needs to be moved and probably needs to be given more water. Water plants thoroughly once a week making sure that the soil is moist. You can have a saucer under the plant to let it soak up the moisture, or immerse it in a bucket briefly or use a moisture meter to determine if the plant received enough water. Just don't leave the plant sitting in water for too long, or once again you introduce the problem of rot and disease. Plants that are white, grayish or red need more light than those that are very green. If you bring succulents indoors, be aware of the fact that less light and less air movement increases the possibility of disease and pests such as mealy bugs or scale.

These are general principles to use when caring for succulents and they will work for most of them. We in the Bay Area are fortunate to have some great local nurseries and botanic gardens with succulents where you learn more about particular plants. Succulents are garden problem-solvers. Watch over them throughout the year and be rewarded with easy-going additions to your garden.