

# and . . . . . SUCCULENTS

By M. S. BRAINARD  
Because Mother Nature has demonstrated herself as being pretty smart, people mucking about growing things sort of consult her Biological Majesty as to what she has in stock and learn to stick to her rules if they as-

pire to success. We are, however, free to choose those items from her vast catalog which interest us most and one of those having tremendous potentialities are the succulents. This remarkable family, which includes cactus, has the peculiarity of hoarding water when it is available, and using it when there is none. They range from almost microscopic little fellers to the huge "organs of the desert." They live in the snow-swept peaks to the torrid desert and alkali flats. Scientists tell us they started out as regular plants but gave up that scheme of life when the weather got tough and they learned to store food and water in their stems, many doing away with their original leaves which caused more evaporation than the country afforded. It says here they built up an unique system of photosynthesis, what ever that means.

Peculiarly, the cactus members of this huge family almost all originated in the Western Hemisphere while the most spectacular of the succulents come from South Africa. We have many succulents in our own back country.

With this tremendous field to choose from and adaptability to such a wide range of growing conditions, plus the fact they have a very wide blooming range—color, time-size—recommend them not only to the casual grower but also to the collector, hybridizer and downright specialists. Besides, familiarity with them will bring on the most astounding and wise-sounding mouthfuls of names in the classical languages with which to permeate your conversation, and, in a manner of speaking, is quite necessary if one is to differentiate between the many kinds.

Almost everyone will tell you this family will grow in sand—that they need no attention at all. They're wrong! And they Won't! While they may appear to, out in their native habitats, much of the desert is richer in plant food than what we consider good growing ground. All it lacks is water.

Beginning sort of hind end to, if you now have a cactus or other succulent that you want to make happy, get a clean flower pot having a non-porous outer surface and with a drainage hole. All porous pots allow the roots next to their surface to dry out unless the pot is plunged. The pot should, if anything, be on the "small size," say, the diameter of the plant, including the spines, if a cactus.

Fill the pot about two-thirds full of coarse river gravel. Now, mix well about equal parts of good garden soil, sharp river sand and well rotted leaf mould, to which should be added a generous pinch of lime in some form—charcoal, agriculture lime, poultry shells, or well mashed egg shells. You can tell if the mixture is ideal if water comes out of the bottom of the pot within a minute after it is placed on the surface. Good drainage is absolutely essential to cactus and succulent culture. Remember how fast water sinks into the desert sands. Occasional water especially during the summer months, will keep the plants healthy. Too much watering will make the soil sour and soggy for any plant. It is because too much water on the coast, during the winter, with improper drainage, that many of the succulents can't be grown out of doors here unless precautions are taken that they don't stand in puddles. The plants do best if allowed to thoroughly dry out before watering.

Water should be withheld from almost all the family between October and April. This is their snoozing period during which they should be dampened say, once a month, and kept cool. Some of the hardy varieties, accustomed down through the centuries to such conditions, can stand freezing, but in general, the danger line for most is around 40 degrees, below which most of them go out of the growing business.

Like all growing things, they need food—not in a bunch but now and then. Once a month or so, give them a little, either dry on the surface and watered in or dissolved in their drinking water. Any ordinary fertilizer will do. If the growing tip of your cactus or other succulent looks lively, it is happy.

They Will Not do well in full sun, all day long. Good bright sunshine for a part of the day is fine. Neither do they like all shade. They love a lath house.

Many varieties of the group grow well out of doors here. They can stand cold weather, such as we know it, and only need protection from the scorching sun. Of course, some of the exotics can be grown, indoors, again avoiding unreasonable sun and shade. It is hard to obtain data as to what an be grown unprotected, in our immediate climate but if the plant is brought from a reputable company familiar with your home zone, you won't get far astray.

To be avoided are the advertised bargain collections at a suspiciously low price. For the writers money I prefer a batch graded to fit a 2 1/2 or 3-inch pot unless shopping for a button collection of miniatures. The larger ones will probably bloom the first year, if they're at all inclined thataway.

All the family are easily grown from seed and a packet of mixed seed from a reputable house will turn up quite a herd. They are also easily propagated from cuttings and offsets and lend themselves readily to grafting. Many different kinds can be grown on the same parent plant and all live happily there-after.

The whole lot is also quite adaptable to dish and miniature gardens with many of them in pastels that blend beautifully.

A good "Don't" for the beginner is don't get too many to start with. Get a few and learn how to keep them happy, then add to your collection as you go along. You'll find out, for instance, possibly, that the family known as Epiphyllum tickle you most. They are the ones without the stickers (which is in their favor, at the outset) and although they are inclined to be scraggly looking critters you can forgive them when they burst out with lily-size delicate pink or red or white blooms hanging in long festoons, from tabletop to floor.

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