

## **Succulents for Montana**

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A succulent is a perennial that stores water in its stem, leaves or roots, allowing the plant to live in areas where water is scarce and to survive long, seasonal dry periods. We usually think of our desert southwest when talking about succulents (all cacti are succulents, but not all succulents are cacti). However, many succulents are perfect plants for Montana gardens and should be your “plant of choice” in dry conditions. Succulents love warmth and are generally divisible into either desert plants, that prefer a drier, sunny garden position, or jungle plants that prefer some shade.

There are three types of succulents – stem, root and leaf. Stem succulents store large amounts of water in enlarged stems and are often columnar, round or barrel-shaped – a prime example is the saguaro cactus found in Arizona. Almost all cacti are stem succulents. The root succulent stores water underground in swollen roots. Even though their stems and leaves may also be fleshy, the main water-storing tissue of these succulents lies in the tuberous roots. Leaf succulents store water in thick, fleshy leaves, which wither in drought and swell up again when water is accessible. Many leaf succulents have practically no stems, simply forming rosettes of overlapping leaves (yuccas).



A succulent collection

There are many succulent family groups with names like Euphorbia, Haworthia, Gasteria, or Aloe. Leaf colors range from beautiful silver-grays to soft greens and dark purples. The plants appear in all forms – creeping, hanging, rosette, columnar, smooth, rough, soft or firm. The flowers can be spectacular with tall, dense orange-red blooms appearing on the Aloe in spring and a rainbow of blossom hues on the familiar Kalanchoe. Since most succulents flower on new growth, they should bloom every year.

Succulents may be grown in either clay or plastic pots. Since plastic pots retain moisture longer, make sure there are drainage holes and the soil mix is free draining. A good soil mix recipe is one part soilless potting mix and one part washed grit (sand can clog the mix and stop drainage). Additionally, top-dressing with pebbles covers the soil to conserve moisture and reduce water splash marks. Use a size and color of pebble to top dress that is appropriate to the container or bed. Inert rocks used for fish tanks or other pea-sized pebbles work well with cacti and small-leafed succulents.

Succulents are great container plants on the patio. The textures, colors and varied growth forms make unique statements, especially when contrasted with some of today's modern gardening styles. Consider a container with a variety of leaf shapes to show the different sizes or velvet and wooly textures available. Equally stunning is a low container holding one genera, such as the rosette-shaped Echeveria (pictured). A succulent collection placed at different heights on a porch or terrace makes a dramatic focal point.



Lovely Echeveria with symmetrical rosettes

These are easy plants to grow and do well in Montana's dry climate. Growth usually occurs when temperatures are above 45°. Fertilize succulents during the spring and summer growth period with a low nitrogen fertilizer such as 15-30-15 or 10-30-20 at half the strength recommended on the label. When moving a potted succulent outside for the summer, temperatures should be above 70° and careful attention should be paid to direct sun exposure until the plant becomes acclimatized. Cover young broad-leaved plants with shading fabric for the first week to prevent scorching. If the leaves turn yellow, immediately remove from the sun before permanent scarring occurs. To protect the container from occasional frosts, cover with newspapers or blankets. Simply move the plants indoors when cold weather arrives. These plants are easy-care winter houseplants if placed in a sunny, warm windowsill and watering is cut back during dormancy. They will suffer scarring, rot and death if exposed to cold or wet conditions.



Other succulent varieties such as the Yucca are winter-hardy in our climatic zone. Most sedums, and the old, tried-and-true hens and chicks (*Sempervivums*) will overwinter outside. Many varieties of these succulents are becoming available to Montana gardeners at local nurseries. A mound of these drought-tolerant plants looks wonderful

in a rock garden, alternated with other native plants like the pasque flower (*Pulsatilla vulgaris*) and silvery lupine (*Lupinus argenteus*).

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