

Succulent Gardens

Many months of grey days and snow have seemed endless for the gardener itching to dig, plant and play outside. Although there's nothing we can do to make the weather advantageous to gardening, there are plenty of indoor gardening activities to keep us occupied and chase the winter blues away. Succulent gardens make excellent winter projects that can adorn your porch or patio when the weather warms up!

The most important step in building a succulent garden is plant selection! Select healthy succulents, but also read the individual plant tags and pair them according to their needs. Although many succulents are sun loving and need little water, not all succulents fall into these categories. Any succulents that enjoy more water or less light should be grouped according to those requirements.

Shape is the next consideration when building a garden. As with our traditional container gardens, you want to look for a 'thriller' a 'filler' and 'spiller' for each garden. Thriller plants are your show pieces. They should be taller than the rest of the plants in the dish and have a "wow" factor. A spiky *Dracaena marginata* with its striking red edges or the tall and slender *Sanseveria* with its many different shades of white, green and yellow would both make excellent statement pieces. The thriller plant should occupy about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the planter and shouldn't be more than $\frac{2}{3}$ higher than the top of your filler plant for proportions that are pleasing to the eye.

The filler portion of your planter should be something that spreads to fill approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ of the pot but can be comprised of multiple types of plants. Plants in the *Echeveria* genus are well suited for this part of the pot. They come in many shades of green, yellow, red and even purple and add interest with multitudes of leaf textures and margins. Consider tones that will complement your thriller plant.

The spiller in your planter should gradually cascade down the sides of your container. *Senecio rowleyanus* is my personal favorite succulent spiller. One of its common names, string of pearls, perfectly describes the bead-like leaves that seem to bubble out of pots and creep down the sides. *Euphorbia myrsinites* also makes an excellent spiller with another fun and descriptive common name; donkey tail spurge.

With your thriller, 2 or 3 fillers and spiller in hand, you're ready for your container! Succulent containers *must* have drainage holes. Selecting a container without drainage holes is setting yourself up for failure. That isn't to say you have to use traditional pots. Vintage tins, old typewriters, toolboxes and toy trucks can all be transformed into planters. If you'd rather purchase a container, a trip to your local garden store will supply you with plenty of fun options. Hanging planters, planters made to look like tree branches or planters with plants seemingly coming out of the backs of various animals are all in abundance at every store I visit. Make sure to use a potting mix labeled for succulents or cacti. These contain much less fertilizer and drain quicker than traditional mixes.

Watering your succulent garden can be the trickiest part of keeping the garden alive and thriving. Soil should always be allowed to dry out in between watering. Sticking your finger down to check soil moisture is an easy way to see if it's time to water. When you do water, soak the soil but make sure the water can drain from the pot. If excess water is collected in a dish, dump the water after 30 minutes. If

you aren't sure if your succulent needs water—wait. Some succulents will start to pucker when they are water stressed. Their juicy leaves begin to look more like raisins as the plant strains to retain moisture. This means you should water your plant well, but only once! Once the soil is completely dry you can water it again, but even water stress doesn't excuse watering more frequently than that.

Enjoy your succulent planter in a south or west facing window for the remainder of this dreary weather. When temperatures outside are consistently above 40 degrees, you can move your planter outdoors. As with all indoor plants, this move should be gradual starting in the shade, moving into dappled sun before the plant ends up in a full sun location.