At Home with Succulents

Ken Altman
Succulents are Plants that Solve Problems

Succulents look great with minimal care, won’t wilt if you forget to water them, and are delightful to collect and use in gardens and containers. The more you know about these intriguing plants, the more you’ll enjoy growing them.

Chances are you’re familiar with jade and big agaves (century plants), but did you know that nearly 20,000 varieties of succulents exist? Many of those currently available in nurseries and garden centers were introduced to the marketplace during the last few decades.

Succulent leaves, which typically are thicker than those of other plants, range in size from dainty beads to 6-foot swords. Some succulents, notably cacti, are as round as balls. A few, particularly euphorbias, resemble undersea creatures. Agaves and furcraeas have upright, fountain-like leaves. Aloe bainesii (aloe tree) and Dracaena draco (dragon tree) form trunks and grow tall.

Ice plants with vivid blooms make eye-catching groundcovers and are good for slopes. Vining and pendant succulents are perfect for hanging containers. Succulents such as adeniums store water in bulbous roots, which can be exposed to show them off.

Photographers, collectors, landscapers and container garden enthusiasts prize dwarf and diminutive succulents with geometric shapes. Among these are sempervivums (hens and chicks), echeverias, agaves and aloes.

Most cacti are leafless succulents with spines that radiate from central points. All cacti are succulents but not all succulents are cacti. Some have long, overlapping spines that create starburst patterns. Collectible cacti include those covered with what appears to be white hair. Such filaments serve as a frost blanket in winter and shade the plants in summer.

Nearly all succulents do well in pots, terraces and planter boxes. Some varieties (such as jade), when confined, will naturally bonsai, maintaining the same size for years. Even those with the potential to become quite large stay smaller longer in containers.

Most succulents need protection from below-freezing temperatures, but frost-tolerant succulents do exist. Among them are yuccas, sempervivums (hens and chicks), many sedums (stonecrops), and some agaves and cacti.

A plant is a succulent if it stores water in juicy leaves or stems in order to survive dry spells.
A garden comprised primarily of succulents needs trimming four times a year or less.

Why Use Succulents?

The Ultimate Easy-Care Plants

In the Southwest, before automatic irrigation became the norm, aloes, agaves, jade, yuccas and shrub aeoniums — along with geraniums — were default plants. Homeowners used these plants to fill bare dirt when they didn’t want to spend time gardening or having to remember to water.

When irrigation systems made watering easy and conserving water was yet to be a concern, the typical yard incorporated thirsty tropica, citrus, rose bushes, annuals and a lawn.

Today, due to a growing awareness that the Southwest is basically an irrigated desert — prone to drought and with limited water for a surging population — things have come full circle. Many homeowners no longer want high-water, high-maintenance yards and lawns.

Fortunately, there now are more water-wise, easy-care succulents in garden centers than ever before, and new varieties are continually being introduced. It is now possible to have a landscape that is colorful, verdant and interesting in ways low-water gardens never were before.

They make good-looking container plants for your home and garden, are easy-maintenance, and are fun and interesting to collect. And because succulents don’t mind neglect, you needn’t worry about them when you’re away.

Much of the appeal of succulents is the way they look. They’re often described as “geometric,” “architectural” and “sculptural.” Succulents are not difficult to grow and, in fact, are perfect for brown-thumb gardeners. Because the plants don’t need a lot of care, growing them frees time that otherwise would have been spent on yard work. Succulents also are friendly to the ecology, posing no threat to birds or other wildlife. Nor do the plants encroach, like weeds, where they’re not wanted.

Other uses for spiky cacti and agaves are as security plants under windows or along property lines. But perhaps the most unusual — and important — use for succulents (typically jade, ice plant, aloes and prickly pear cactus) is as a wildfire barrier. Because of their high moisture content, the plants are slow to catch fire and do not transmit flames.

Collectors have enjoyed succulents (the more bizarre the better) for decades. The Cactus & Succulent Society of America now has chapters in every major city, and many host exhibitions. Also well worth seeing are public gardens and nurseries with idea-rich plantings of succulents (see Resources, p. 23).
A rule of thumb is to let soil go nearly dry between waterings.

Water, Soil & Fertilizer

Most succulents are capable of going without water significantly longer than similarly-sized garden plants, but they do need regular water to look their best. Depending on the weather, the plant and the size of the container, this might be as often as once a week or as infrequently as once a month.

The fatter the succulent, the more water it holds and the less it needs. Golden barrel cactus is an example of a succulent that does fine in the arid Southwest on rainfall alone. With its shape, color and texture, the plant also makes a wonderful landscape enhancement.

Regardless of which succulents you grow, make sure water drains rapidly from the soil. There are many successful soils for succulents (they are not fussy), but the ideal mix contains about equal parts organic material (like peat or ground bark), and inorganic material (like pumice or perlite — but not more than 10% sand).

Dry soil weighs less than wet, so one way to tell if a potted succulent needs water is to lift it, or push a wooden chopstick into the soil. If the stick is damp when you pull it out, with soil adhering to it, don’t water. When you do water, let it flow out the holes in the bottom of the pot to flush salts that may have built up in the soil.

During the growing season (spring and summer for most succulents), commercial growers use dilute fertilizer to encourage lush and rapid growth. But if you’re pleased with the size of your succulents and the way they look, you needn’t fertilize them at all. Or simply apply a balanced liquid fertilizer diluted to half the recommended strength, once or twice a year.

What happens to a succulent if its soil goes completely dry? As the plant draws on stored moisture, its leaves may lose their sheen and shrivel. Yet these are tough plants. Even when neglected for a month or more, most succulents recover when watered again.

Temperature, Light & Grooming

If garden plants such as geraniums, philodendrons, hibiscus and bougainvillea are prevalent in your area, it means that frost is not a concern, and you can grow succulents outdoors year-round.

Even if temperatures occasionally drop below 32ºF, many succulents — once established or in the right location — handle cold better than one would expect. Your garden likely has microclimates that are significantly warmer than exposed areas. Walls radiate heat, as do pavement, hardscape and boulders. Keep in mind that southern exposures are warmest; northern, coldest. Also, the slightest cover, such as an eave or tree branch, will provide some frost protection.

Surprisingly, a little more cold, sun or dryness than the plants prefer may serve to make them even lovelier. The colors of the leaves of certain succulents (notably jades, aloe and echeverias) will intensify when they are stressed, turning them vivid shades of orange and red.

Most succulents do best when given bright light (several hours of sun daily). Although many will grow in shady or indoor conditions, the plants may stretch toward light. Rotating potted succulents 180 degrees once a week or so will keep growth balanced.

Succulents are among the most pest-free plants, especially when grown outdoors. Good air circulation prevents harmful insects from settling on the plants. Occasionally, however, mealy bugs (which look like bits of cotton) may appear where leaves join stems. Aphids, which look like black or yellow pinheads, are attracted to new growth — especially flower buds. Hosing the plant will dislodge aphids. For houseplants, keep rubbing alcohol diluted to half strength handy, and spray pests, should they appear. Or, dab them with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol.

A little grooming will keep your succulents tidy. When flowers are finished, snip stems close to the plant. As old leaves turn dry and brown, cut or pull them off. If bits of debris or dry leaves fall into a dish garden or become stuck to a cactus, extract them with long-handled tweezers. And if you need to pull weeds from around spiky cacti and agaves, you’ll find that fish hook pliers come in handy.
Dish Gardens

Use a high quality soil media in the container, such as commercial cactus mix. Or create your own mix of equal parts potting soil and pumice or perlite. Place plants to your liking, fill recesses with soil, tamp firmly and water thoroughly. Place in bright light or dappled sunlight. Water well when soil is dry to the touch. Trim plants to maintain desired shape.

Around the House

Left: Vibrant Kalanchoe luciae (Flapjacks) contrasts with a simple glazed pot. Below Left: Burgundy-tipped Aeonium atropurpureum in burgundy bowls enhance entry pedestals. Below: Single and mixed plantings are brought together in a collection of terracotta pots. –Design by Schnetz Landscape

Below: Tuck sedums into steps. From top step, down: Cotyledon ladismithensis, blue Senecio mandraliscae, Echeveria gibbiflora hybrids, Sedum rubrotinctum. –Design by Amelia Lima

Below: Renew a strawberry pot with a showcase of succulents: Senecio jacobsenii cascades from the top; side pockets feature echeveria and sempervivum rosettes, as well as trailing Ceropegia woodii variegata (String of Hearts). –Designed by Chicweed
Inspiration

In the Landscape

Left: Echeverias and graptoverias form stripes.
Below: Rosea ice plant surrounds aeoniums and Agave attenuata.

Right: A bedding planter is filled with green and cream colored Aeonium ‘Sunburst’, and coordinating variegated phormium. The pot at the far left is planted with Furcraea foetida ‘Mediopicta’.

Below: Blue Echeveria imbricata rosettes alongside Agave bracteosa which has smooth, supple leaves. Further down, Portulacaria afra forms ‘Variegata’ combines with assorted aeoniums.

Above: A front-yard garden combines yellow-edged Agave americana variegata (in back), red-tipped Kalanchoe luciae, a flowering aloe, blue Senecio mandraliscae, golden barrel cactus and dudleya (in front).
Below: Aeonium decorum, Kalanchoe luciae, Aloe ‘Rooikappie’ and Sedum reflexum ‘Blue Spruce’ border a walkway.

~ Design by Matthew Maggio for Sherman Gardens
~ Design by Deena Altman
~ Design by Chicweed for Elanit Abrams
~ Design by Waterwise Botanicals
**Textural Cactus**

Cacti and succulents are wonderful for small collections and as well as large-scale collectors. The variety of shapes, patterns, textures and colors make these plants enticing to collect. Perfect for decorating an office, windowsill, patio, dorm, kitchen or bath, these easy-care plants will start conversations and inspire the designer in you.

**In the House**

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**Tips for Transplanting Cacti**

When transplanting, loop a rolled newspaper or twisted cloth around the widest part of the plant. An efficient way to carry a barrel cactus is to lasso it with a length of soft hose. Tall columnar cacti often are transported wrapped in carpet.

A recently dug up ferocactus is easily carried with a length of hose.

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*Left:* The sun intensifies the purple of Opuntia violacea ‘Santa Rita’ in blue pots. *Below:* Oreocereus (right) and Echinocactus grusonii (golden barrel left) combine with flowering osteospermum.

*Left:* Averaging less than a half inch in diameter, Mammillaria gracilis v. fragilis looks like tiny snowballs. *Lower left:* Mammillaria spinosissima ‘Red Headed Irishman’.

*Left:*: The sun intensifies the purple of Opuntia violacea ‘Santa Rita’ in blue pots. *Below:* Oreocereus (right) and Echinocactus grusonii (golden barrel left) combine with flowering osteospermum.

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Surprisingly, some of the most beautiful flowers in the plant kingdom are those of cacti.

Below: Aloe arborescens flowers in January.
Bottom: Euphorbia milii (crown of thorns) blooms in shades of red, pink, yellow, peach, white and bi-colors.
Right: Lampranthus aurantiacus (gold ice plant)

Left and below: Fenestraria aurantiaca (baby toes) (left) and Lithops (Living Stones) have transparent windows that enable sunlight to enter.

Above: Intense magenta blooms of a cactus-Trichocereus grandiflora hybrid.
Below: Aeonium flowers

Below: Twisting Cereus peruvianus ‘Spiralis’ is remarkable in the landscape.
Further down: The hairs of Oreocephalocereus celsianus provide protection.
Right: Aloe bainesii grows to 10 to 20 feet.

Design by Solana Succulents
Aeoniums have a distinctive, daisy-like appearance. Amazingly, the leaves of aeoniums can vary in color from black to rose and yellow. The rosettes grow on the ends of stems that, depending on the variety, may be a quarter inch or more in diameter.

Agaves are native to the Southwest and Mexico. Depending on the variety, leaves may be several inches to several feet long. Agaves have crisp silhouettes that look great in front of boulders and walls. Large agaves make excellent garden focal points. Diminutive agaves are ideal for pots and for massing in garden beds.

Cacti are highly efficient moisture-storage vessels. Their spines, which in some varieties overlap to form intriguing patterns, protect, shade and/or collect moisture for the plants. Cacti can be spherical, columnar or pad-forming, and all varieties produce satiny flowers. As living sculptures, cacti make excellent potted plants.

Aloes hail from South Africa. The dozens of varieties of aloe range from fist-sized to trees, but all have gel-filled leaves in brilliant shades of orange, yellow or rose-red.

Varieties

**Agave**

- **Confederate Rose** Agave
  - Grows to 14” tall x 16” wide.
  - Fast off-setting, durable agave forms attractive clumps.

- **Artichoke Agave**
  - Grows to 18” tall x 30” wide.
  - Classic agave – makes a great statement in the landscape.

- **Climbing Onion**
  - "Onions" grow to 6” in diameter over time.
  - Perfect windowsill plant.

- **Climbing Aloe**
  - Free-flowering, clustering cactus.

**Aeonium**

- **Aeonium ‘Blushing Beauty’**
  - Grows to 14” tall x 24” wide.
  - Clustering rosettes are an unusual chocolate color.

- **Aeonium ‘Kiwi’**
  - Grows to 15” tall x 24” wide.
  - Bright yellow variegation is stunning.

**Aloe**

- **Aloe ‘Blue Elf’ Crocodile Plant**
  - Grows to 12” tall x 12” wide.
  - Durable, clustering plant.

- **Aloe ‘Crosby’s Proliﬁc’**
  - Grows to 10” tall x 15” wide.
  - A classic, clumping aloe. Flowers easily.

- **Aloe 'Crosby’s Prolific'**
  - Grows to 10” tall x 15” wide.
  - A classic, clumping aloe that blooms almost all year.

**Aloe ‘Firebird’**

- Grows to 4” tall x 10” wide.
- Reputable flowering miniature aloe that blooms almost all year.

**Aloe Firebird**

- Grows slowly to 4’ x 4’.
- A slow growing free aloe with leaves forming fans.

**Aloe ‘Patio Plant’**

- Grows to 4” tall x 10” wide.
- Reputable flowering miniature aloe that blooms almost all year.

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- Grows to 4” tall x 10” wide.
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**Fan Aloe**

- Grows to 4” tall x 10” wide.
- Reputable flowering miniature aloe that blooms almost all year.

**False Octotillo**

- Grows to 12” tall x 2” wide.
- Madagascar origin. Sculptural spires of stems.

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**Crassula**
Crassulas are either shrub-forming or trailing, and are good container plants. Jade plants, the best known Crassula, are common in frost-free gardens and are grown worldwide as houseplants. Crassulas have many leaf shapes, from paddle to bean to tubular, and come in silver-gray, green, orange and red-tipped.

**Echeveria**
Echeverias have rubbery leaves arranged like the petals of a rose. As such, they make wonderful additions to flower beds and floral-style container arrangements. Colors range from reddish-brown to icy blue and include shades of green, frosty violet, rose-red and nearly indescent pastels.

**Euphorbia**
Euphorbias, from Africa, are the Old World’s equivalent to cacti. Succulent euphorbias come in a multitude of shapes, from chubby little balls like Euphorbia anoplia (which makes a delightful addition to pots) to tall, columnar Euphorbia acrurensis (which is great for adding vertical interest to dry gardens).

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### Varieties

**Crassula**
- **Silver Torch**
  - *Crassula argentea* ‘Hobbit’
  - Grows to 4” tall x 4” wide.
  - Blazing red foliage when grown in bright sun.

**Hobbit Jade**
- *Crassula argentea* ‘Hobbit’
- Grows to 4” tall x 4” wide.
- A fancy form of jade plant.

**Crassula ‘Campfire’**
- *Crassula argentea* ‘Campfire’
- Grows to 3” tall x 3” wide.
- Blazing red foliage when grown in bright sun.

**Golden Barrel**
- *Echinocactus grusonii*
- Grows to 3” tall x 3” wide.
- Most popular cactus for gardens, landscapes and collectors.

**Mike**
- *Euphorbia acrurensis*
- Grows to 6” tall x 6” wide.
- Freely branching tree euphorbia.

**Tanzanian Zipper Plant**
- *Euphorbia anoplia*
- Grows to 1” tall x 1” wide.
- Clusters of small, glossy, almost iridescent leaves.

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**Echeveria**
- **Propeller Plant**
  - *Crassula perfoliata* v. *falcata*
  - Grows to 15” tall x 10” wide.
  - Fragrant red flowers.

**Valentine Plant**
- *Crassula platyphylla*
- Grows to 4” tall x 4” wide.
- Red foliage – very attractive and easy to grow.

**Echeveria ‘Incantaeds’**
- *Crassula perfoliata* v. *falcata*
- Grows to 6” tall x 6” wide.
- Strong, thick flower stalks on silver-white rosettes.

**Firesticks**
- *Euphorbia tirucalli* ‘Firesticks’
- Grows to 3” tall x 3” wide.
- Turns red in cool weather. One of the most striking succulents.

**Medusa Plant**
- *Euphorbia anoplia*
- Grows to 5” tall x 5” wide.
- Icy-blue rosettes.

**Minature Echeveria**
- *Echeveria minima*
- Grows to 3” tall x 4” wide.
- Icy-blue rosettes.

**Alabaster Swirl**
- *Euphorbia lactea cristata* variegata
- Grows to 18” tall x 24” wide.
- Dramatic, pink-edged crests become more convoluted over time.

**African Snowflake**
- *Euphorbia polygona* ‘Snowflake’
- Grows to 10” tall x 10” wide.
- Green-white stems slowly grow into clusters.

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**Varieties (Golden Barrel)**

**Hens and Chicks**
- *Echeveria imbricata*
- Grows to 6” tall x 1” wide.
- Blue rosettes pup freely to form tight clusters.

**Echeveria ‘Perie Von Nurnberg’**
- Grows to 6” tall x 1” wide.
- Pink rosettes margined with cream.

**Echeveria ‘Topsy Turvy’**
- Grows to 6” tall x 1” wide.
- Tubular leaves and silvery color make this a standout.

**Good Luck Plant**
- *Euphorbia trigona* ‘Royal Red’
- Grows to 6” tall x 3” wide in time.
- Red version of the green form.

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- **African Snowflake**
  - *Euphorbia polygona* ‘Snowflake’
  - Grows to 10” tall x 10” wide.
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**Green Coral**
- *Euphorbia anoplia cristata*
- Grows to 5” tall x 10” wide.
- The growing point is an undulating fan called a “crest.”

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In the House

Most succulents can grow in a sunny window, but certain varieties do best as they are either adapted to low light or they grow so slowly that they maintain their shape for a long time. Sansevierias, haworthias, gasteraloes, most cacti, jade plants and aloes perform well as indoor plants.

Mimicry

Mimicry plants (living stones) resemble smooth rocks or pebbles. Their native habitats are among the harshest in the world, with only a few inches of rainfall a year. They grow in coarse sand with just their translucent tops showing, enabling sunlight to reach the interior of the plant.

Opuntia

Opuntia cacti, commonly called prickly pear or beaver tail, have paddles that grow atop each other, creating the whimsical look of mouse ears. It is an excellent background plant, gets by on rainfall alone, and can be used as a firebreak. In Mexico and parts of the Southwest, opuntia pads are eaten as a delicacy known as nopales.

Varieties

• Green Ice
  Gasteraloe ‘Green Ice’
  Grows to 6” tall x 8” wide. Super structural. Great house plant.

• Flapjacks
  Kalanchoe luciae
  Grows to 15” tall x 12” wide. Great form; reddens if enough light and cool weather.

• Golden Ball Cactus
  Notocactus leonhardii
  Grows to 12” tall x 8” wide. Miniature blue cactus.

• Old Man of the Andes
  Oreocereus celsianus
  Grows to 24” tall x 8” wide. Evolved hair to shade the body and capture moisture from mist.

• Flapjacks Houseleek
  Sempervivum arachnoideum
  Grows to 4” tall x 6” wide. Beautiful white webbing in the center of rosettes.

• String of Pearls
  Senecio rowleyanus
  Grows to 4” tall x 6” wide. Incredible color on this special cultivar.

• Cobweb Houseleek
  Sempervivum arachnoideum
  ‘Cebenese’
  Grows to 4” tall x 6” wide. Classic opuntia form.

• Angel Wings
  Opuntia microdasys albata
  Grows to 8” tall x 6” wide. Cute little white-dotted pads; classic opuntia form.

• San Pedro Cactus
  Trichocereus pachanoi
  Grows to 15” tall x 4” wide. Easy to grow, clustering columnar cactus.

• False Saguarro
  Pachycereus pringlei
  Grows to 4” tall x 8” wide. Wonderful as a potted plant.

• Madagascara Palm
  Pachypodium lamerei
  Grows to 4’ tall x 8” wide. Wonderful as a potted plant.

• Madagasca Palm
  Pachypodium lamerei
  ‘Chimera’
  Grows to 4’ tall x 6” wide. High color on this special cultivar.

• Elephants
  Notocactus magnificus
  Grows to 1” tall x 4” wide. Great form; reddens if enough light and cool weather.

• Elephant Bush
  Portulacaria afra
  Grows to 6’ tall x 4’ wide. Favorite food of elephants in Africa.

• String of Pearls
  Senecio rowleyanus
  ‘Chihuahua’
  Grows to 4” tall x 6” wide. Huge flowers, (up to 6” diameter) in spring on this clustering cactus.
New Cultivars

Hybrids and Patented Plants

Breeders are continually selecting new cultivars and creating new hybrids to offer plant lovers. This may be for better hardness, bug and disease resistance, purely for aesthetics, or for any and all of those reasons. Examples of this are the Chamaelobivia cacti hybrids that result from crossing Chamaecereus sylvestrii (peanut cactus) with Lobivia species. The resulting hybrids show a greater resistance to mealy bug as well as diseases and the exceptionally large flowers come in a variety of gorgeous colors. If a new hybrid displays significant aesthetic appeal or vigor, it may be eligible to be patented. The patented and selected varieties shown here are from Altman Plants in Vista, California. (Patented plants are issued a patent number that is often included in its name.)

Left: Echeveria ‘Neon Breakers’ PPA
Below Left: Aloe ‘Wizard’ PPA
Below Below-Middle: Echeveria ‘Crimson Tide’ PPA
Below-Right: Chamaelobivia ‘Rose Quartz’ (Peanut Cactus)

Above: Opuntia subulata cristata ‘Three-Headed Cerberus’
Above-Middle: Echeveria ‘Gorgon’s Grotto’ PPA
Above-Right: Echeveria ‘Cloud’

Resources

Explore

Radio
Garden Life Radio Show

Web
The Cactus Collection
www.CactusCollection.com

Organizations
Cactus and Succulent Society of America
www.CSSAinc.org

Books
Designing with Succulents by Debra Lee Baldwin
Succulent Container Gardens by Debra Lee Baldwin
Succulents for the Contemporary Garden by Yvonne Cave
The Garden Succulents Primer by Gideon Smith & Ben-Erik Van Wyk

Public gardens with succulent plantings
Huntington Botanical Gardens
San Marino, CA
www.Huntington.org

LA County Arboretum
Arcadia, CA
www.Arboretum.org

Ruth Bancroft Garden
Walnut Creek, CA
www.RuthBancroftGarden.org

San Diego Botanic Garden
Encinitas, CA
www.SDBGarden.org

Sherman Library & Gardens
Corona del Mar, CA
www.SLGardens.org

Water Conservation Garden
El Cajon, CA
www.TheGarden.org

Sources
Many nurseries and garden centers, including national retailers such as Home Depot, Lowes and WalMart, offer succulents.

Oasis Water-Efficient Gardens
Escondido, CA
www.Oasis-Plants.com

Waterwise Botanicals
Bonsall, CA
www.WaterwiseBotanicals.com

Online store: www.GardenLife.com

Radio
Garden Life Radio Show

Web
The Cactus Collection
www.CactusCollection.com

Organizations
Cactus and Succulent Society of America
www.CSSAinc.org

Books
Designing with Succulents by Debra Lee Baldwin
Succulent Container Gardens by Debra Lee Baldwin
Succulents for the Contemporary Garden by Yvonne Cave
The Garden Succulents Primer by Gideon Smith & Ben-Erik Van Wyk

Public gardens with succulent plantings
Huntington Botanical Gardens
San Marino, CA
www.Huntington.org

LA County Arboretum
Arcadia, CA
www.Arboretum.org

Ruth Bancroft Garden
Walnut Creek, CA
www.RuthBancroftGarden.org

San Diego Botanic Garden
Encinitas, CA
www.SDBGarden.org

Sherman Library & Gardens
Corona del Mar, CA
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Above: Opuntia subulata cristata ‘Three-Headed Cerberus’
Above-Middle: Echeveria ‘Gorgon’s Grotto’ PPA
Above-Right: Echeveria ‘Cloud’
At Home with Succulents explains what you need to know about plant care, soil and watering, offers creative design ideas, and includes an illustrated guide to great succulents for your home and garden.