
CACTUS and SUCCULENT SOCIETY of NEW MEXICO

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GETTING STARTED GROWING CACTI AND SUCCULENTS

WHEN THEY GROW, THEY NEED WATER:

Cacti and succulents are what they are so they can live through long dry periods by going dormant.

- They go dormant during native habitat dry periods; even if watered at these times, they cannot use the water, and will sit and rot.
- No calendar is built in; the plant reacts to light variations in the length of day.
- Plants usually need lots of water during their growing period, almost none when dormant; set rules of "how often should I water" are really misleading.
- The only good generalization: *Give what they would get in their native home.* You need to learn their names so you can learn their habitat.

There are generally four types:

- Summer grow (e.g., most cacti, *Lithops*)
 - Winter grow (winter rainy, summer dry, e.g., *Conophytum*, some *Crassulas*)
 - Spring-fall grow, winter-summer dormant, e.g., *Haworthias*; *to a certain extent*, Jade)
 - Sporadic year-round rains, e.g., many *Euphorbias*. These are the easiest to grow for many people.
- Water only when dry and only during its growing season.*

WHAT THEY GROW IN: The best general rule: *well-drained soil.*

- Minimally this means add sand (not sea sand or fine sand; use coarse builder's sand or sift your own); also add small gravel or pumice, etc.
- An easy formula is 1/3 prepared potting soil, 1/3 sand, 1/3 gravel or pumice. Many plants will do well with this mix; others don't want any potting soil and you'll have to add a little clay soil instead. Still others want a richer soil — the epiphyllums and some African succulents, for example. So learn about your plant first.

POTS: Some need shallow, some deep; some like plastic, others do better with clay. As you live with the plants under your own conditions, you'll work it out. A plant in a north window being watered regularly once a week has different needs from one outside in full sun.

- Plants with *tap roots* need deeper pots; if they're very susceptible to rot, a clay pot might be better, or else multiple plants in one pot, e.g., *Lithops*.
- Many plants, e.g., some *Mammillarias*, have very *shallow roots* and need shallow pots or they'll stay wet too long and may rot.

FERTILIZER: In Albuquerque water has a high salt content, so it's important to choose a fertilizer with iron and other trace elements. Fertilizers that dissolve in water work best; try those with a *high middle number.* *Use only when the plant is growing* -- perhaps once a month during its growing season (some not that often; others, for example *Hoyas*, need it twice a month).

LIGHT: The range of needs is too wide for generalization; note that Albuquerque's light is brighter than England's, where many of the books were written, so make allowances.