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HARDY SEDUMS IN ALBUQUERQUE

'Old Man's Bones'... 'Dragon's Blood'... 'Voodoo'....No, this is not the recipe for witches' brew. These are the common names of some of the sedum species (collectively called **stonecrops**) we have attempted to grow outside in Albuquerque. Let's be very scientific and precise. There are two major categories of sedum – those that take over and those that show a bit of restraint and stay where you put them!

I (Penny) first became interested in sedums when I was a child on my grandparents' farm in Kentucky. Cascading from a large wooden, dirt-filled barrel in their yard were trailing yellow-green, leafy stems that bore clusters of little yellow star-flowers in late spring. Our family called the plant 'live-forever' (*erroneous*), 'moss' (*erroneous*) or '**stonecrop**.' Using wads of mud, I stuck sedum stem pieces into cracks between stones on the front of the root cellar. Next spring the root cellar was bearded with green stems and yellow flowers. Later I learned the plant is ***Sedum sarmentosum***, a non-native that is likely an infertile hybrid. My cuttings from Kentucky have been growing well here in Albuquerque, with a bit of extra water and some sun protection. The mud-daubing is still a workable method for planting the sprawlers and crawlers of the sedum tribe. In recent years my preferred method has been to transplant by "trowel and error."

Sedums are native to both Old and New World; the varieties for sale in nurseries often are not native North American species. In general, for the happiest sedums outdoors in Albuquerque, pick a full sun location with well-drained soil. Sedums will grow among your cacti, but your small cacti will soon be engulfed and smothered by the vigorous sedum stems. Thinning the sedum out of those hidden cactus spines is no fun. Just like with children, you have to set reasonable boundaries for the groundcover sedums.

As a groundcover, sedums cannot take foot traffic. If you use them for large areas, we recommend stepping stones for access. In general the groundcover sedums do well in rock garden style plantings where they love to sprawl across miniature cliffs and creep between boulders. Groundcover sedums tend to bloom in spring or early summer. Flower colors are usually white or yellow, or sometimes pink, but while the flowers are attractive, these plants are more often grown for form, texture, or foliage color. Some species are evergreen and will even grow during our milder winters. Others drop their leaves in winter, and their bare stems lie around looking like a tangle of worms. Many sedum groundcovers will look puny and pallid if they do not get enough sun.

We have noted that nurseries do not always label sedums with the correct scientific species name. Common names, while picturesque, may be unreliable also. For example, two very different species are commonly sold as '**Blue Spruce**' because of their leaf color. ***S. sediforme*** is the taller species with rather stiff leaves, stems and flower stalks. ***S. reflexum*** is more prostrate, with pliant leaves and stems. Both have yellowish flowers. ***S. reflexum*** is available as other varieties or cultivars; a popular one is '**Angelina**,' which develops orange foliage in full sun or toward fall.

Perhaps the easiest groundcover sedum to establish is ***S. album***. It has small plump leaves and white flowers. Once established it is very drought tolerant, even in full sun. It can be used as an accent in pots of annual flowers.

S. spurium (pink flowers) has rounded flattened green leaves. The variety '**Dragon's Blood**' develops red to maroon leaves in full sun, though in New Mexico it prefers some shade. Other cultivars often available are '**Bronze Carpet**,' '**Red Carpet**,' and '**Voodoo**.'

Other species we have tried that are hardy in Albuquerque under the right conditions include ***S. caudicola***, ***S. cockerellii*** ('**Cockerell's Stonecrop**,' which can be found – but not collected – high in the Sandias, so buy the seeds), ***S. dasyphyllum*** (tiny plant with gray-green leaves – once it is set out it is fragile in

transplanting), *S. ellacombianum* (usually erroneously labeled *kamtschaticum*), *S. kamtschaticum* (try *variegatum*, 'Golden Carpet,' or 'Takahira Dake'), *S. lineare* (light green, narrow leaves with white margins), *S. makinoi* ('Salsa Verde' and 'Ogon'), *S. middendorffianum*, *S. divergens* 'Old Man's Bones' (usually labeled as *globosum*), *S. pachyclados* (leggy rosette from Afghanistan), *S. pallidum*, *S. sexangulare* (often mislabeled *grisebachii*), *S. sieboldii*, *S. spathulifolium* 'Cape Blanco,' *S. takesimense*, *S. ternatum*, and *S. wrightii* (another New Mexico native sometimes available as seeds). The Cherokee tribe grew *S. ternatum* for medicinal purposes, so it is found wherever that tribe has lived, from the Appalachians to Missouri. It needs pampering in our area (in a pot in shade with extra water).

If you want plants with a bit more height and restraint, try the late-summer-blooming species. These plants die back to the ground in winter, leaving dry stalks with seed heads. In early spring the hardy rootstock pushes up new stems to rapidly form a globular mound of foliage up to 2 feet across and 2 feet tall, once they have become established. In summer the clump produces flat or convex clusters of flowers. When the seed heads form they are usually rust-colored or brown and stay attractive for several weeks. Give them good drainage and bright light to full sun.

The number of cultivars offered by nurseries seems to increase yearly. They are usually labeled as *Sedum telephium* or *S. spectabile* or sometimes with just the cultivar name. Look for *S. telephium* 'Autumn Joy' (light pink convex flower heads), *S. spectabile* (flat inflorescence ranging in color from white to pink to purple, depending on cultivar). *S. spectabile* 'Brilliant' has intense pink flowers. Other cultivars we have tried are 'Frosty Morning' (white and green foliage, nearly white flowers), *Sedum* 'Matrona' (long maroon stems, pink flowers), and 'Emperor Purple' (dark purplish foliage and stems, deep purple flowers). There are cultivars available with variegated cream and green foliage. There are several smaller, more sprawling late-blooming sedums. They too die back above ground in winter. Most have attractive pink to pinkish purple clusters of flowers. Try 'Vera Jameson' or 'Rosy Glow.'

A brief *caveat* – some sedums labeled and sold as hardy are really only hardy enough for landscaping if you live in Southern California, Tucson, or Mexico. Plan to grow these sedums as houseplants – keep them in pots and bring them indoors in winter: They make nice additions to a greenhouse, solarium, or sunny window. Otherwise avoid these for landscaping: *S. rubrotinctum* (sometimes called 'Rosy Fingers' for its red-tipped leaves if grown in strong sun), anything labeled 'Burro,' ('Burro's Tail,' 'Burrito'), *S. adolphii*, *S. treleasii*, and *S. nussbaumianum*. They are generally winter-blooming in a sunny window or greenhouse.

You can grow your hardy sedums from seed, but rooted cuttings and fully potted specimens are easy to find. Most sedums do not need rich soil or even excessive fertilization. Once you get your sedums in the landscape, add some *Sempervivums* (aka Hen and Chicks) in the ground and *Orostachys* (grow in pots). None of these beauties has spines, thorns, or even a bad attitude.