

The Biggest Mistakes Made in Growing Succulents



• Overwatering.

- Overwatering is one of the most common problems when growing cacti and succulents. As a general rule, plants should be watered in the summer on a 10-14 day intervals in well-drained soils, more often if the soil is sandy and less often if the soil is heavier (clay).
 - **In the winter**, irrigation should be reduced due to cooler temperatures and less water use by the plant.
 - **Best tip for the summer: learn about your plant water needs by checking the root zone 2-3" below the surface before watering. It should be dry. If in doubt, don't water.**

• Not watering enough.

- "Cacti do not need water" is a myth. They need water to live just like any other plant.
- Temperature has an effect on the rate of desiccation. Observe your plants to see if they're looking shriveled. If so, water a bit more often.
- Many C&S do not need to be watered over the winter, but is best to give them a little bit of water to prevent the loss of roots.
- If a plant's roots have dried up, water it very lightly until roots take hold again.

• Not providing the proper amount of sun light.

- Just because cacti and succulents are often found in arid habitats doesn't mean they can be placed or planted in full sun. Many species grow where they get a degree of shelter from rocks, larger plants, and the environment.
- Growers should be cautious as they place their plants from a sheltered position into more light. Young barrel and and some yuccas can be sunburn and the scars are permanent.
- **Best tip: Use a shade cloth (30%) to protect plants from the fierce summer sun.**

- On the other hand, not exposing the plants to enough sun light creates pale, sickly, or abnormal-looking plants (etiolation).
 - **Best tip: Rotate plants often to expose the whole plant to the same amount of light.**
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• Trying to grow plants not suitable for your weather conditions.

- Many of the plants offered at nurseries are sure casualties of local conditions because they have been grown in greenhouses under protected conditions. Better to choose plants that have a chance, such as many Agaves, Opuntias (prickly pears), Aloes, Haworthia, Gasteria, Kalanchoes, and Euphorbia.
 - Many Echeverias, Semperviviums (hen & chicks), Sedum, Lithops, Pleiospilos (living stones), and a number of cacti do well during our mild days, but can die in the summer heat.
 - Bringing plants indoors to the air conditioning can protect them from the Texas summer heat.
 - **Best tip: Plants should be protected in the winter fo temperatures below 40° F.**
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• Growing Plants Indoors Incorrectly

- Succulents can be very successfully grown indoors given the right treatment. Bright light is essential to most types.
 - Exceptions would the Sansevierieas- (Mother-in-Law's Tongue, Snake Plant) which survive in very low light conditions.
 - Thorough and infrequent watering. Water most succulents growing indoors no more than every 2 weeks. Check the soil before watering. If the soil has moisture 2"-3" inches below the surface, wait another few days before watering.
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• Failure to use the proper soil mix.

- Many beautiful and inexpensive plants from local nurseries are planted in a peat-based medium. This medium is hard to water correctly and inevitably becomes too wet or too dry.
- We recommend using a commercial cactus potting soil, but mixed with something like perlite, sand, or small gravel. This way, you'll have a fast-draining medium that is much more suitable to Houston weather.
- Good soil mixes for Lithops potting soil to 90%-80% gravel.



(Living Stones) include 10%-20%

- For most cacti succulents, a 30%-40% potting soil to 70%-60% gravel is recommended.
- A 50% potting soil with 50% perlite is a good mix for succulents like Sanseverias (snake plants), small agaves, and yuccas.

A variegated cultivar of *Sansevieria trifasciata* (namely 'Laurentii'), the most common species in cultivation



- A 50-60% potting soil to 50%-40% gravel is suggested for leafy succulents like Adeniums (Desert Roses).



From The Herb Cottage Collection

- **Best tip: Soil used for cactus & succulents must have some draining material.**

- **Ignoring the plant's requirements for growth.**

- It is very important to know the growth habits of your plants.
 - For example, most cacti and succulents should be grown at temperatures between 75-90°F, and some may require trace minerals in the soil.
 - These can be provided by fertilizing, but the common fertilizers must be used appropriately, usually at ½ strength, or a slow-release product should be used.
- **Best tip: A fertilizer for tropical plants is perfect.**
- If your plant is variegated (light or pale green tinging towards white or silver), use a fertilizer with a lower content of nitrogen.

- **Leaving plants root-bound too long.**

- The roots must have enough room to grow and thrive. The roots of plants that have grown in a pot for a long time completely fill the entire pot in a tight mass. This creates desiccation problems because water may have a hard time penetrating the mass.
- The roots also cease to acquire nutrients and the plant could perish.

- **Best tip: Repot when roots begin to show through the draining hole.**
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- **Poor planning when landscaping.**

- Landscaping with cacti and succulents is becoming very popular, but poor planning may result in a disaster.
 - Some key elements for success include building a raised bed by mounding the soil, or even constructing a large in-ground planter.
 - This is similar to a elevated 8" to 12" above the surrounding area. A raised bed promotes drainage, an absolute if you want to be successful with a variety of cacti and succulents.
 - The soil mix must be fast-draining, but not too lean. A combination of expanded shale or pea gravel, with sharp sand and compost is a good general purpose blend.
 - **Test your blend.** Water should not stand on the surface more than a few seconds before entering the soil.
 - Plant early in the spring if possible, and be prepared to shelter plants under netting until they are fairly well established.
 - **Best tip: Choosing the right landscape plants is best done with advice from those who have had success.** Pay attention to your Winter low temperatures and resist planting varieties that are not cold tolerant in your location.
 - Lay down one or two layers of weed block. Cut "X"s in the weed block and plant your plants through these "X"s. Use gravel, decomposed granite, or clean crushed stone as a mulch/dressing for a finish treatment.
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- **Not paying attention to pest infestations.**

- Overall, cactus & succulents do not get infested by insects (such as scale) as often
- as other plants. However, they are susceptible and on occasion we must treat them when manual removal of bugs is not enough.
 - Plants treated with chemicals must be protected from the sun; otherwise, they will get burned easily, especially with products that contain oils.
 - There are good, non-toxic ways to treat common infestations of pests on succulents
 - Rubbing alcohol works on both scale and mealy bugs- the most common pests of succulents. Simply dip a cotton swab or small brush in rubbing alcohol and apply to affected area, covering the insects with the alcohol. This does not hurt the plant at all! You can rinse with a spray of water afterwards to remove the dead pests.
- **Best tip: Isolate plants with scale or other insects, and protect them from the sun.**

The original article was originally published in the 56th issue of the weekly e-newsletter Lazy Gardener & Friends in the Houston Chronicle. I have amended the information to apply to more areas than just Houston and I have added additional information.