

# Low Maintenance Gardening with Succulents

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Photography by Tammy Jensen, Jensen Nursery, Winnipeg, MB

## Introduction:

There are many great articles out there on the web regarding succulents – including several print versions in past editions of *Prairie Gardener*. Since that is the case, I will use this article as more of a brief summary of succulents and their usefulness in the prairie home and garden. I want to include ‘home’, since I have lived with some succulents in my residence for decades, and with the excitement of living art, living walls, and fairy gardens purposely designed for the indoor décor, succulents are indeed a versatile type of plant.

## Definitions:

The Master Gardener training that I went through demands that I search out a technical description of the word ‘succulent’; the get-down-and-dirty (literally) type of person that I am calls out for a more operational definition. So what is it when we use the word ‘succulent’ in our gardening vernacular?

Gleaned from Wikipedia, most botanists recognize that “...some parts that are more than normally thickened and fleshy, usually to retain water in arid climates or soil conditions.” The parts of the plants include leaves, stems, and even roots. So called geophytes’ survival strategy is to die back to the ground and place its moisture reserves in underground organs. We also must remember the most important succulent that stares us in the face: the cactus. This is an apt segue into the plants that are called xerophytes – those plants adapted to living in dry environments. Most succulents fall into that category. Although we may have in our mind certain tried and true succulents for the prairies, we must not forget this was an adaptive natural strategy, and that a *genera* cousin may not have fleshy stems and leaves at all on the other side of the world. Botanical purists may even throw in many orchids and bromeliads into the mix. In summary, the *Journal of Experimental Botany* (look up: Von Willert *et al*; circa 1992) operationally describes a succulent as: “any plant that possesses a succulent tissue, and further specified a succulent tissue as a living tissue that... serves and guarantees a ...temporary storage of utilizable water, which makes the plant... temporarily independent from external water supply...”.

There are many plants that fall into this definition that we have used / could use on the prairie to decrease the burden of fertilization and watering in and around our landscape.

## In the ground – perennials and annuals

The succulent plants that are leading the way in my Winnipeg neighborhood are the *Sedums* (stonecrop – small and large varieties) and the *Sempervivums* (houseleeks, hen and chick varieties). The sedum dies back to the ground, similar to any perennial – but very late in the season. Because of their longevity, they offer great fall color with many having the entire plant turn crimson and pink reds, while blooming

composite flowers; beneficial at nourishing migrating butterflies and moths in September and beyond. The hens and chicks are great evergreen ground-covers (staying succulent under the cover of snow) spreading from the mother plant (hen) as offsets (chicks). Incredibly easy to propagate these two types of succulents, one can buy several cultivated varieties and spread them throughout their yard and enjoy all sorts of form, size, colour, and texture in their yard. Take advantage of areas that are close to hot walls, dry areas, and other problem sunny areas. Just be sure to create more sharp drainage by amending heavy clay – though I have found spreading stonecrops happy in cracks of pavement!

One special succulent to highlight for permanent prairie planting are the cacti of Canada which include four taxa: *Escobaria vivipara* var. *vivipara*; *Opuntia fragilis* var. *fragilis*; *O. humifusa*; and *O. polyacantha* var. *polyacantha*. These species are well adapted to survive the freezing temperatures prevalent during the long Canadian winters. For more in-depth knowledge on these fascinating prairie plants (their cousins are more notably located in the extremely hot climates of the world), Google: 'Cota-Sanchez cactus research'. As well, live specimen prairie cacti are sometimes available for sale from local native plant breeders. Desert-like plants that would go well with the cactus are various *Yucca* varieties, as well as drought tolerant grasses – annuals (such as portulaca and ice plant), perennials, and natives. Just be sure to understand growing habits: ultimate mature size and stolon spread may smother out your cactus patch over time.

### **Out of the ground – pots for the patio, balcony, and beyond**

There are ways to enjoy succulents out of the ground and to beautify specific outside living areas such as patios, decks, alcoves, and balconies. There is also the added advantage of not only controlling the drainage with custom mix soil, but given enough light and care of preparation, one can move these succulents from outdoors to indoors to outdoors for many years to come. The placement of succulents in containers also gives some of the smaller ones a chance to be seen by your guests at a more intimate setting. Some of my favorites include:

- Burro's Tail (*Sedum morganianum*) – best advantage is planting in a hanging basket, and prefers medium to high light for best performance.
- Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*) - medium to high light, and fertilize three times in summer using a 10-30-10 fertilizer to promote blooms.
- Hens-and-Chicks (*Sempervivum tectorum* or *Echeveria elegans*) - Two succulent plants share the common name of hens-and-chicks (also see above). When grown as houseplants, the two perform the same way. Both should be allowed to dry slightly between watering, as over-watering causes rotting. Water very little during winter dormancy. By the way, the Latin translation of 'sempervivum' means "ever living." Hens-and-chicks work well in succulent wreaths.
- Jade Plant (*Crassula ovata*) - The jade plant is an old-fashioned favorite because it is so easy to grow! Allow the soil to dry completely between watering; they are most commonly killed by overwatering. Keep jade plants potted in terra-cotta for good air movement through the soil and to help balance a top-heavy plant. If you want this to be a centerpiece, leaves can be pinched allowing only the top portion to grow.

- Medicine Plant (*Aloe vera*) - The healing sap of this familiar medicinal plant has been used for centuries to treat wounds and sunburn. Allow the soil to dry out between soakings. Keep it in direct sunlight or the greatest amount of light possible; but be sure to use a potting mix designed for cactus.
- Panda Plant (*Kalanchoe tomentosa*) - There are dozens of kinds of *Kalanchoe* plants, but the panda plant is among the most common. A native of Madagascar, panda plant is grown strictly for its foliage, but if you insist on blooms, *K. blossfeldiana* will provide flowers. Thick green leaves are covered with soft silver hairs, giving the plant a fuzzy, blue-gray appearance, with the edges of the leaves tipped with brown or rust-color hairs. A really unusual plant to have in or around the prairie garden.
- Ponytail Palm (*Beaucarnea recurvata*) - The ponytail palm doesn't look like a succulent, even though it is related to the agave plant. Its water-storage unit is the swollen, bulbous base of the trunk that gives the plant its other common name: elephant foot.
- Snake plant (*Sansevieria trifasciata*) - This succulent can take a beating. Allowing the soil to dry out slightly between watering will prevent leaf and crown rot. This plant can brighten up a north balcony, as it tolerates low light. Further, there is no need for fertilizer if you start with a healthy soil mix.

If you want to get into the latest trend, then try out the idea of 'fairy gardens' and succulent indoor art. These types of plantings take advantage of the easy-care nature of the sedums and the small intricacies, and colours of many varieties. Many plants can be used to be complementary to the shallow rooting sedums, and they include (dwarf /micro) varieties of: *Acorus*; *Ajuga*; *Alchemilla*; *Armeria*; *Campanula*; *Dianthus*; *Hypericum*; *Lamium*; *Leptinella*; *Lysimachia*; *Ophiopogon*; *Sagina*; *Saxifrage*; *Thymus*; and *Violas*. Pardon the botanical Latin, but it is important for the reader to seek out the extremely small sized cultivars of the genera listed – to be successful in their quest of truly miniature plants at mature growth. As we all know, "common names ain't so common"; only the scientific name can make you sure you have sourced the correct plant from your local nursery or favorite catalogue.

So, I encourage you to explore the wonderfully diverse world of sedums. Take advantage of the versatility, size, and low water requirements of these plants – whether in the ground, in a container, or hanging on a wall.

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