

Succulents That Thrive in Foothill Gardens

By Rachel Oppedahl

I'm not a fan of hot weather, so my gardening thoughts are turning to plants that thrive in long, hot, dry summers: succulents. From the soaring saguaro cactus to the “baby toes” groundcover, succulents are tough, sun-loving, long-lived plants that are great for drought-prone areas. However, not all succulents can withstand our cold, wet winters and heavy soil, so it's best to know which ones can.

The word “succulent” comes from the Latin word “succulentus,” which means juice or sap. They are defined by their ability to store moisture. Represented by more than 40 botanical families worldwide, one family is indigenous only to the American and South American West: cactus (*Cactaceae*). What makes cacti different from all other succulents are round, cushion-like structures called “areoles,” from which spines, branches, hair and flowers grow.

All succulents must have excellent drainage. A rocky and/or sandy soil is best, so if your soil is heavy clay, you can add coarse builder's sand and/or gravel. Most succulents will thrive in a rock garden that gets plenty of sun. Because of their tough, sometimes prickly or fuzzy “skin,” succulents aren't typically appealing to garden pests or deer. Most succulents, other than cacti, evolved in cooler, wetter places than deserts, so they're good candidates for foothill gardeners.

Here are some succulents that, if sited correctly and not over watered, should flourish here:

Sedum – Also known as “Stonecrop,” *Sedum* is a large genus (400-plus species) of flowering plants in the family *Crassulaceae*. Some of the most attractive, hardy—and unusual—groundcovers are varieties of *Sedum*. A few popular shorter varieties include: *S. angelicum* (“Angelina”), with delicate whorls of green to yellow leaves reminiscent of miniature pine needles; “Firecracker” *Sedum* with tiny, oval, burgundy leaves that form what look like dense flowers; and “Tricolor” *Sedum*, with green leaves edged in pink and white. “Autumn Joy” *Sedum* grows to 18” to 24.” A show-stopper in fall, it has large, showy mauve-red flower clusters that soften to a dusty pink and attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

Sempervivum – “Hens and chicks” is the more popular name for this *Sedum*. Ground huggers, hens and chicks have grey or green leaves that form a rosette, and they propagate by forming offsets. The “hen” is the main, or mother, plant, and the “chicks” are the offspring, clustering close to the mother plant. ***Echeveria*** is a similar-looking succulent that has been hybridized extensively. ***Graptosedum*** is related to ***Echeveria*** and has the same bluish-grey, thick, fleshy leaves; but it propagates by sending out a stem from the center of the rosette.

The Sierra Nevada mountains and foothills are home to a number of native *Sedum*, including “Canyon Liveforever” (*Dudleya cymosa*) and “Bitter Root” (*Lewisia rediviva*). The California

Native Plant Society's Calscape website (<http://calscape.org/>) is a good resource for researching native Sedum.

It occurred to me that I could literally plant nothing but succulents in my garden and end up with everything I would want—color, texture, variety, food for the butterflies and birds—minus the water bills, pesky insects and the need to fertilize. Hmm. . .

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