

Taking care of your new cacti and succulents

Cacti and succulents are highly evolved plants adapted to grow in arid conditions. All cacti are native to the Americas; succulents include members of many plant families and grow all over the world.

LIGHT: Most cacti and succulents need sunny, or very bright conditions to grow well. They grow best on a South or West windowsill, or a bright Eastern windowsill that receives at least 4-6 hours of sun a day. Haworthia, Gasteria, and Sansevierias are three succulent plant groups that can grow well under lower light conditions such as a bright North windowsill.

WATER: Cacti and succulents are more easily killed by overwatering rather than under watering as they will rot if their roots stay soaking wet. This is not always immediately obvious—sometimes a plant that has looked fine for months may suddenly collapse in a mess of slush, or drop out of the pot; these plants unfortunately cannot be saved. However, the plants on sale here in house plants are potted in a very porous mix of volcanic rock and coco peat, more porous than most succulent mixes, so that the mix drains very well. Water your succulents and cacti once a week if the top of the soil is bone dry to the touch. This can be done in the kitchen sink so that the pots can drain completely before being replaced on the windowsill. Taper off watering your cactus and succulents in the fall when the shorter days arrive so that you are watering them only once two weeks, and then once every month during the winter months. Most cacti and succulents go semi dormant over the winter. Come March you can gradually increase the frequency of watering and you may be rewarded with flowers.

Most cacti and succulents are slow growers and do not need much feeding. Never feed cacti and succulents in the winter when they are semi-dormant as this may burn the roots. If you wish to feed your plants choose a plant food that is made especially for cacti and succulents as regular plant food is too rich for them. Mix the plant food with lukewarm water according to the directions and feed them during one of your regular waterings. I suggest no more than two feedings, once in early spring when your plants begin to grow again and once in summer, in spite of what the plant food container may say.

REPOTTING: Cacti and succulents do not need to be re-potted as often as regular houseplants and many enjoy being root bound in their pots. If you want to repot once a year and the roots of your plant are not breaking out of the pot, or coming out of the bottom, you can just replace the soil and keep the plant in the same pot. If you choose a new pot, be sure to get a pot with a number of drainage holes in the bottom. Use a special cactus and succulent soil, and after repotting wait one or two weeks before watering so that any broken roots can heal up before they are exposed to water. This helps prevent root rot.

TROUBLE SHOOTING: Extremely dry conditions in winter may attract spider mites to your cacti and succulent plants. These tiny bugs can be identified by finding tiny white webbing on your plants—you may not be able to see the actual mites. Isolate the affected plants and wash them off with a light spray of lukewarm water from a plant mister from time to time. You can try to prevent spider mites by lightly misting all your succulent and cactus plants from time to time with a mister. This replicates the dew or fog cacti and succulents often experience in their natural homes in the wild.