

**West Kildonan Horticultural Society**  
**Succulent presentation—June 7, 2016**



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To quote famous Canadian plantsman Thomas Hobbs, "If the words 'tender' and 'succulent' immediately make you think of chicken, then this should change your life. Tender succulents are to today's gardeners what Canna and Colocasia were five years ago. They are the epicenter of a new botanical quake of creativity. Their ease of culture and fabulous variety of form allow **anyone** to create something fairly amazing their very first try."

Succulents are not one family of genus or species but refers to all plants that store water in their leaves, stems and roots to withstand drought in their habitats. There are succulents that are hardy to our Zone 3 but today I am referring to tender perennials for us.

Succulents are excellent for containers as they do not require large amounts of water. For cottagers and vacationers this is a bonus as the containers can be moved into shadier locations interim while away. But this is not to say they don't need any water. Thoroughly water when the soil is entirely dry. A clue that they desperately need water is that the leaves become soft and 'wrinkly' looking. Planting succulents in containers offers the gardener excellent control of their growing conditions—ie fast-draining soil mixes.

**CONTAINERS**

Ideal containers for succulents are shallow wide ones which offer plenty of 'table top' space to plant. I favour terra cotta as its colour is neutral and blends well with the many colours of

succulents. Also, terra cotta is porous and allows air and warmth to the roots and discourages root rot. Drainage holes are necessary. If your container has none drill several depending on pot size. ie. 12 inch pot with 5 one half inch drainage holes. Before drilling clay, soak the container in water and use a drill bit for concrete use.

### SOIL

Succulents need well-drained soil. I use a mix of one part soil—one part perlite –one part coarse sand. Before planting in the container, incorporate into the soil a slow release fertilizer (Osmocote 14-14-14). Top dressing the soil after planting helps prevent soil splashing up, keeps moisture from accumulating around the base of the plants and adds an esthetic look to these desert plants making them look right at home mimicking their natural habitat. Beige pea gravel and coarse sand are two examples. I often add some larger rocks, large coloured glass balls or fun whimsical items.

### FERTILIZATION

During the summer these tender perennials should be fertilized occasionally. About once a month I use a mild liquid feed of 20-20-20 fertilizer. The plants will show you their appreciation by growing much larger and plumper. Succulents do love moisture as long as it comes and goes. By summer's end and especially enjoying warm days and the cooler nights, they exhibit their most spectacular beauty. Feeding should be suspended at the end of August to prepare the plants for winter dormancy just as in their native habitat.

### PLANTING

Artistically arranging your succulents requires a few simple rules and understanding harmony, proportion and contrast. Plant colours should be similar or complementary. In succulent plantings one or two plants are more special—these are the focal points. Do not place them in the centre but off to one side. This makes your plantings more natural ie. When does nature plant with the tallest or most unusual right in the centre?

Group your other plants tightly around the focal ones with the trailing plants around the edge to spill over. Alternatively, if one has one large specimen plant it can be planted singly in an urn or large container to make it a focal point in one's garden. ie. Agave

All succulents flower in their natural landscape. Sometimes after flowering the 'mother' plant will die. For the truly ambitious gardener one can take all the leaves from the flower stem and grow each as a new plant.

### WINTER CARE

Your love of your succulent's summer beauty will have you hooked and obsessed with their continuation. Before bringing your plants into the house wash them well with insecticidal soap checking for any invaders. There is a 'How-to Video' on the Manitoba Master Gardener website showing the method: <http://www.mgmanitoba.com/resources/how-to-gardening-videos/> What these plants need for overwintering is very bright light and cool above-freezing temperatures. Low light will cause plants to stretch and become unattractive. I store mine in my cold room very close under grow lights providing little water over the winter months. This

simulates their winter dormancy. Always be watchful for 'wrinkly' leaves, a sure hint that they do need a bit of moisture. About the end of March I begin to mildly fertilize with 20-20-20 in preparation for their return to summer. The plants will need some 'tweaking' and rejuvenation of the soil. Leggy plants are cut, allowed to 'callus' a bit—dip into rooting hormone #1 and replanted in newly prepared soil and clean containers. Succulents are very resilient and love this treatment. Any large leaves that possibly break off can be rooted in separate 'nursery' pots. Trailing succulents can be cut back and apart to offer many new plants.

Planting succulent containers stretches your garden experience from the common to the exotic and your creativity becomes endless with the many varieties available to you.