A definitive guide to caring for Succulents
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Introduction to succulents

Succulents, according to the dictionary, are “plants that have some parts that are thickened and fleshy, usually to retain water in arid climates or dry soil conditions”. According to the trend setters, however, succulents are a versatile, low-maintenance way to decorate your home and garden, especially if you live in an area that’s drier than an empty merlot bottle.

Regardless of where you live, there is a variety of succulents, at least one or two of which will survive in your climate. Even if you’re the ultimate botanist, without the perfect conditions, you’re going to mourn the untimely passing of your beloved succulent plants and wonder where you went wrong.

That’s why we’re offering you this guideline, or as your succulents would call it, lifeline. By working your way through each chapter of this guideline, you’ll learn all the basics to be able to care for your succulent plants, indoors and outdoors. Successfully incorporating all the wisdoms we share with you will result in plants that thrive on neglect. Has anything ever sounded so appealing?

So, without further ado, please enjoy this guidebook. It was written for people who hate instructions but need to know how to get stuff done.
Please don’t die!

Looking at succulents and their needs

Succulents, also known as fat plants, are frequently described as ‘low maintenance’ and ‘impossible to kill’. The fact that these pretties are trending in the most beautiful gardens, homes, shops, and displays makes them super attractive, especially because their prices are lower than the standards of a frat boy after 12 beers.
This encourages people to make mass and impulsive purchases believing they've made a lifelong friend that will survive thick and thin, never wavering in loyalty and beauty. Unfortunately, a succulent is not a puppy. When the succulent starts to grow long, thin, and pale, or when it withers and dies, it can leave the caregiver feeling a tad hopeless. The best part is that it can take a succulent up to a year to die, sometimes. You might spend all the humanitarian efforts you possess to stop the endless demise of dearly beloved, to no avail. It will be as painful for you as it is for the plant. Once the inevitable happens, you hear people say ‘I managed to kill a succulent’ as though this is a very difficult thing to do. Fear not, dear plant murderers. You are not a ‘special kind of unskilled’ nor are you neglectful.

Succulents have a very special set of needs. The good news is that you don't need Liam Neeson’s special set of skills to care for them. Once their basics are met, they will give you lots of joy, thriving on being forgotten.

Let’s get to know the needs of your fat little friend. We can call him pup (turns out baby succulents are called pups).

SOIL - THE FRUITS OF YOUR LABOURS START IN THE GROUND

Succulents are natural desert-dwellers, which leads to the general assumption that they will thrive in any soil. If they can survive in beach sand, they can survive anything, right? This little myth is the start to a tragedy, which may last many months and will end in a shrivelled and dead succulent carcass.

Succulents need well-draining soil. This will mean their roots don’t have to sit in damp conditions - they hate wet feet more than a pedigree cat. On the other hand, sandy soils won’t do either. You need to be sure that the soil you use contains the perfect balance of nutrients and provides the correct drainage for these fussy eaters. In their natural habitat, succulents enjoy all the minerals and nutrients freely from the soil. Contained and cared for at home, however, they rely on us to provide them with the food they need, just like a puppy.

INDOOR SUCCULENTS

Purchase a specialised potting soil designed for succulents and cacti. These are available from garden and home centres which are attached to hardware stores. It’s also immensely helpful to buy your succulents from vendors who supply potting soil.

If you’re a DIY guru, you can mix your own potting soil. You can test your potting soil to see how well it will work before you use it. A mixture of regular potting soil with a handful of sea or river sand is all you need. If you don’t have easy access to sand, you can use perlite, crushed granite, pumice, chicken grit, or calcined clay (I’m not sure those are easier to come by than sand, but at least you have options). After mixing your soil and sand, wet some and squeeze it together into a ball in your fist. If it clumps together and holds, you probably need a little more sand to help with drainage.

OUTDOOR SUCCULENTS

If you are growing cacti or succulents outdoors, you’ll still need well-draining soil. If your soil is exceptionally rich, you can mix in a few spades of river sand or any other aforementioned gritty materials. Succulents will thrive in sunny conditions, between rocks, crevices and cracks. Ensure you mix the sand deep enough to benefit the root systems of the plants you’re putting in the ground. If this sounds laborious, you can try an outdoor potted succulent instead. This is especially handy if you live in a cold region, succulents dislike the cold, being potted means you can move them indoors or to the veranda during winter.

Voila!

You’ve just completed the first step in caring for your succulents. That’s one step closer to killing less.
Water
water, everywhere...
(help!)
Understanding how to keep your fleshy friends hydrated is a delicate balance of just enough and not too much. It takes a little self-discipline not to overwater or pamper your succulents too much. If you break their stems or leaves (it’s better not to do this) you will find they’re gooey and fleshy inside. This is where they store their water, like a camel, except they commit to the gig by storing water all over and not only in their backs.

Many people will tell you to simply spritz them with a spray bottle - that advice is about as useful as the male nipple - please believe me, those people are quietly killing their succulents without meaning to.

Succulents are designed to live in a desert, they want the drought, it’s the dry times that nudge them to grow thick, healthy roots under the ground to absorb the water, when it comes. Spritzing your plant will cause it to grow thinner, smaller roots higher up, designed to grab the moisture as desperately as a dehydrated monkey with a tequila hangover. To support healthy root growth, water thoroughly, but only when you remember to (try to remember exactly once a week).

Ensure all the excess water can run freely out of the pot to prevent the wet feet we spoke about previously. Overwatering is a major cause of death for millions of silent succulents worldwide. Don’t become a statistic.

If you got all that, you just mastered watering your succulents, cum laude!

Well done!
Remember how we learned about photosynthesis at school? Photosynthesis is the plant’s way of getting the vital nutrients it needs from carbon dioxide and water, using sunlight. You’ve just mastered watering, don’t ruin it now. You’re so close to not killing your plants, you might as well keep reading and save a life. You go, you good samaritan!

Let there be light!
Sunlight is essential for all carbon-based lifeforms, either to a greater degree or not so much but still somewhat. Succulents, being native to the desert, are no exception to this rule. They require at least six hours of gentle sunlight per day. Please take note of the word gentle, it is important! Remember when we spoke about specific needs? Well, this is rather specific.

Pale succulents, like pale people, are more likely to suffer in direct sun. Red, green, grey, and prickly or spiny varieties survive the full-heat much better, if you insist on exposing them to the harshest elements.

In our sunny country of RSA, it’s recommended to give them afternoon shade, and indirect, morning sunlight. Direct sun will burn and dehydrate your plants. When we talk about succulents being desert-dwellers, we’re really just humouring them. They’re actually very sensitive. They’re also as fussy as a toddler sitting in front of a plate of green peas and broccoli. So, remember, six hours per day in a high-light area. Dappled shade or early morning sun is perfect.

Q: What have we learned about succulents?

A: That they are supposedly desert-dwellers, but in no way, shape or form are they actually able to survive in any desert on earth - they’re fussy about their soils and they can’t survive direct sunlight. They are officially the worst desert dwellers ever.

Still, we love them.
Once again, our fleshy desert-dwellers fail to live up to the expectations of their natural environment, preferring a cool, fresh breeze to hot, stagnant air. Just like people and puppies, succulents breathe air. As gorgeous as your glass bowl terrarium looks, you wouldn’t keep your puppy in there, so don’t keep your succulent in there either.

Succulents don’t enjoy strong winds, but they do need fresh, moving air daily. Just like girls with long hair, your succulent dislikes humidity. Because it’s very forgiving, however, it will probably forego this flaw if you ensure all of its other needs are adequately met. For optimum happiness of your low-maintenance plant, try to keep it in drier air conditions.

Layered or bunched succulents may look pretty, and the arrangement will certainly work for some time, but long term, you’ll run into difficulties.

The good news is that by giving your succulents the breathing space they need, they will give you fresh air too, in return.
While we sleep, we’re breathing carbon monoxide out of our lungs, into the air. In the morning, the plant wakes up, ravenously hungry and ready to photosynthesise (hope you’re providing it with the right sun?) and there’s this wealth of delicious carbon monoxide in the air. Your succulents love this, it’s their equivalent of oxygen. So, they spend their day happily breathing in all your carbon monoxide and converting it to oxygen. How’s that for a team player? And you thought your little plant was just a fleshy face.

Remember balance is key. Your succulent requires fresh, moving air and carbon monoxide. You don’t need to exhale near it at all, simply breathe as normal. For fresh air, an open window is ideal.

Spot Test

Q: Knowing your succulent is not a puppy, what would you say is the best way to look after it?

A: Treat your succulent like it’s a puppy. It needs clean water, the correct food, and fresh air. Not too fresh. Just somewhat. You can try take it for walks too.

Are you feeling less homicidal yet? Yes? Good. Keep going, you’re not a fully-fledged non-murderer quite yet.
So, you want to grow more succulents?

Propagating means growing plants from cuttings. This area of succulent care is about as straightforward as Valentino Liberace. We’ll try to navigate this as simply as possible.
PROPAGATION BY DIVISION

Great for victims of light deprivation (for more information on this, please see the next chapter on etiolation), you can propagate new plants by harvesting the leaves.

Gently pull off the leaves that are below the rosette (the flower-looking bit) ensuring you keep the base of the leaves intact. Many newbies believe the leaves should be put into water at this point. It turns out, you’ll land up with a soggy mess that’ll grow at the same pace as vegetable soup.

Place the harvested leaves in an empty tray to dry out. Trust the process.

Once the raw end has formed something that looks like a callous, you can begin the rooting process. Move your leaves to a tray that contains cacti potting soil and place the leaves where you would like them to take root.

Spritz the leaves with the forbidden spray bottle we mentioned earlier in the book. Do it lightly, staying wary of overwatering.

Wait patiently for roots. Spritz wine into a glass daily for yourself, it helps with the waiting process. Once roots appear, you can spritz the leaves once a week.

Small plants will form and eventually the original leaf will wither. You can gently remove it and once the roots are developed you can replant it. Be very careful not to damage any roots.

PROPAGATING OFFSETS

Most succulents will make babies after a time, also known as offsets. They’re typically attached to the original plant and look like smaller versions of the same thing (as babies generally do).

Once you see small roots forming, you can gently amputate them. Wait for the raw ends to callous and dry.

Place your offsets into a glass of water as you would a flower. Ensure the roots can reach the water.

Place your glass in an area that gets the right amount of sunlight (as discussed in previous chapters). Because succulents abide by exactly zero rules and they love a good curveball, you can forget everything we discussed thus far and keep your succulents living in the water, if that’s what they’re used to (this does not apply to succulents that have tasted earth - earthed after birthed can’t be reversed). You can also plant them into containers or into the garden.

Feeling happy with propagating?

Pass GO! and collect noddy points.
Because succulents simply don’t play by the rules, you might encounter some challenges. The best thing to do is to pour yourself a drink and deal with the problem by consulting a handy little checklist. We’re providing you with said checklist of possible problems so you don’t accidentally bestow the kiss of death on your succulent.
ETIOLATION

Leave the Greek dictionary on the shelf, it’s actually French, and I’ll explain exactly what it means. It refers to the way your succulents can become stretched and elongated. The good news is that this word is not a dreaded disease.

If your pretty looks long and stretched, it’s reaching for more light. It will also become pale. Without adequate light, your succulent can survive for a long time but it will never reward you with much beauty and it will eventually die prematurely. Once it starts reaching, you unfortunately can’t undo what has been done. You can simply prevent it from progressing further, by providing the gentle sunlight we spoke about earlier.

PREMATURE AGING

Just like people, your succulent can get wrinkly. In plants, this is not actually due to aging, but rather dehydration. Keep the Nivea in the cupboard, it won’t help. Refer to chapter two on watering to remedy the problem.

YELLOWING AND ROTTING

It’s difficult to tell whether your succulents are suffering because you’ve overwatered. You could say it’s as obvious as albino penguins in a snowstorm. Still, there are clues.

If your cactus seems mushy, yellow, and looks like its about to fall apart, it’s because you’ve over-watered. Cacti are very greedy, they will keep drinking even if they’ve had enough water, leading to their cell-membranes bursting. Therefore, you need to make sure they don’t overdo it by only giving them water when they need it. (Refer to chapter two for details).

INSECTS AND PESTS

Pests like mealy bugs, worms, ants, aphids, nematodes and spider mites are all threats to succulents. While indoor succulents are less likely to contract such pests, they are all vulnerable to some degree. There are great pesticides available, and natural approaches can be very effective too. Marigolds, mint, cinnamon, rosemary, catnip and lavender are all effective at deterring pests. A plant addict’s paradise paradox: Get more plants to protect your plants. It’s a good life.
CONGRATULATIONS!

You have successfully completed this guide on how to care for your succulents. If you haven’t completed it and decided to skip to the end to see what happens, the story ends with you remaining a ‘succulent-murderer-even-by-accident’.

If you have diligently combed through each chapter, get yourself a notebook and notes on your plants. You can track everything you’re doing and how they respond in the weeks that follow. Remember to add any tips you learn along the way.

You have officially achieved the guru status of green-fingered succulent plant mastery and that certifies you (in no official manner whatsoever at all) to be a legal (also, in no official legal regard) guardian of a succulent.