



# SUCCULENTS SIMPLIFIED



Growing, Designing, and Crafting  
with 100 Easy-Care Varieties

**DEBRA LEE BALDWIN**

Author of *Designing with Succulents* and  
*Succulent Container Gardens*

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**Frontispiece:** Succulents range in size from ground covers to trees that look like something by Dr. Seuss.

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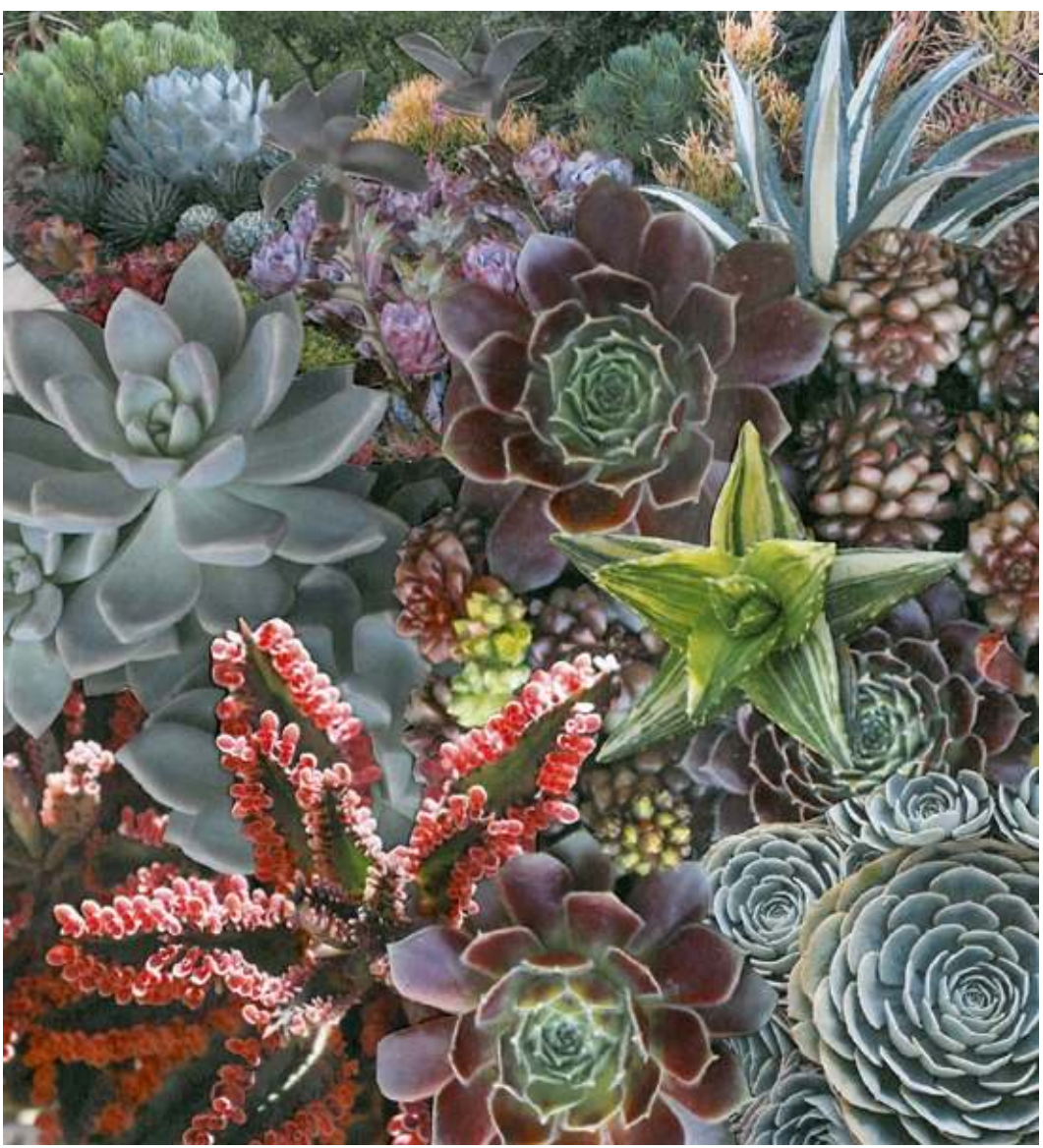
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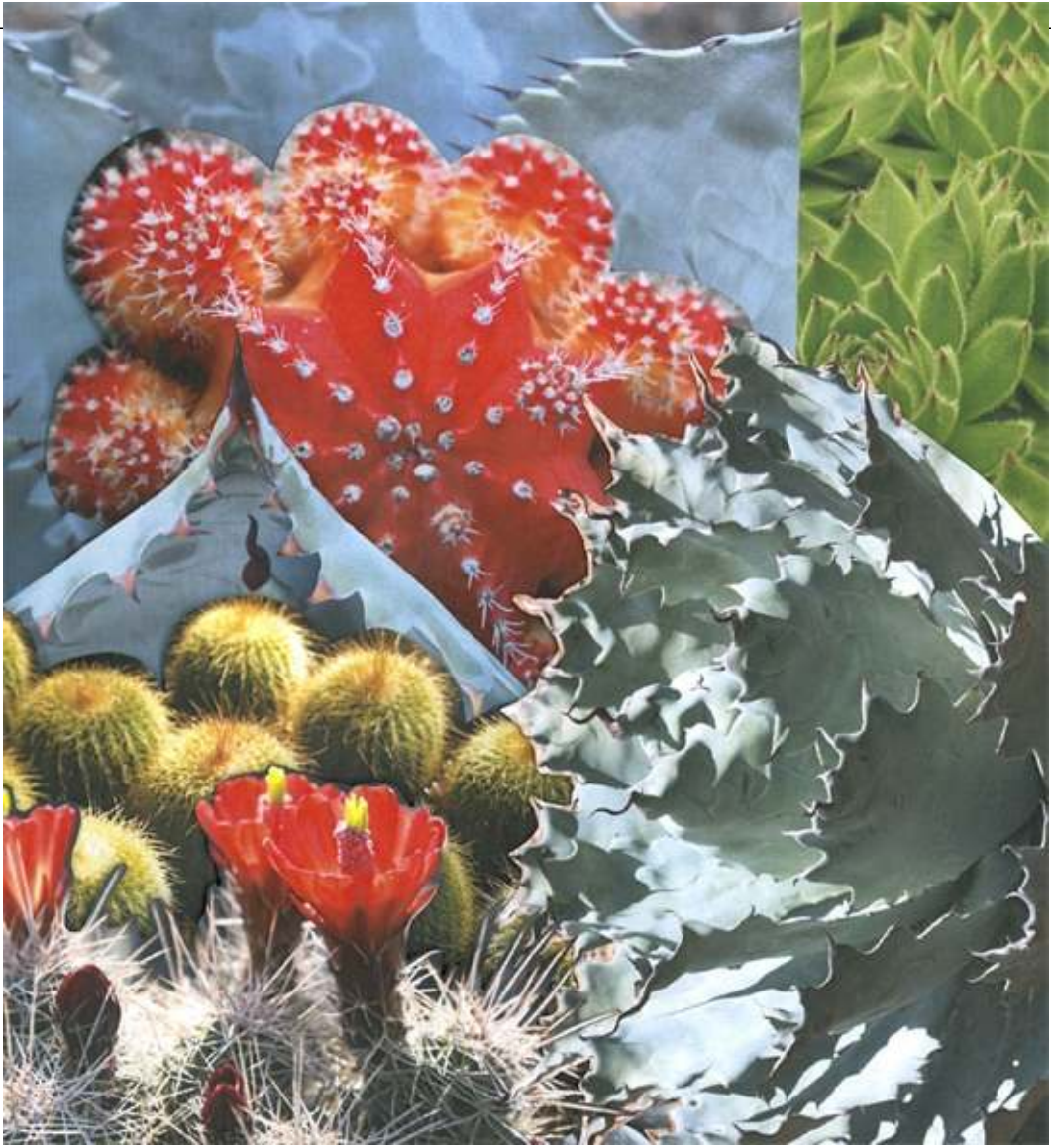
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To Sandi, Denise, and Patti

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# CONTENTS

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Acknowledgments

Preface

## **PART ONE: ENJOYING, GROWING, AND DESIGNING WITH SUCCULENTS**

Why Succulents Are Seductive

Keeping Your Succulents Fat and Sassy

Composing Great-Looking Succulent Gardens and Containers

## **PART TWO: HOW-TO PROJECTS THAT SHOWCASE SUCCULENTS**

Succulent Cake-Stand Centerpiece

Succulent Squares

Living Picture Vertical Garden

Low-Light Dish Garden

Hanging Basket of Mixed Succulents

Succulent-Topped Pumpkins

Succulent Topiary Sphere

Special-Occasion Succulent Bouquet

## **PART THREE: 100 EASY-CARE SUCCULENTS**

Suggestions for Further Reading

Metric Conversions and Plant Hardiness Zones

Credits

Index

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# PREFACE

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When people ask me how I became interested in succulents, I tell them I toured an amazing succulent garden on assignment for the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. Horticulturist Patrick Anderson and his lovely garden opened my eyes to the beauty of succulents and their potential in garden design.

Yet even as I say this, around the edges of my awareness floats a much earlier memory. I was eight or nine years old when I went with my mother to a home in a wealthy community for an occasion I don't remember. When we returned home, my mother described the house to my father: "Big picture windows, but imagine having to clean them. Views of the golf course, but the property is too steep. Surrounded by trees, but they shed leaves and bark. Big deck off the living room, but no garden."

No garden? There had been an astonishing one, in pots on the deck, with plants unlike any I'd seen before. They looked like eels, starfish, and coral. One was a perfect little sphere with a green-and-maroon herringbone pattern. Others were necklaces of blue-gray buttons, rubbery silver-blue roses, and sticks of green chalk with windowed tips.

My mother concluded wistfully, "Maybe someday Debbie will have a house like that." Why would I want it, I wondered, if it came with dirty windows, messy trees, and near-vertical land? On the other hand, who wouldn't want that deck garden? It became something I longed for, along with a saltwater aquarium, a hot air balloon, and an unlimited supply of chocolate marshmallows.

I no longer want any of those, but succulents continue to seduce me. I'm that little girl again who sees a succulent I haven't seen before, or even a well-grown one I may have seen dozens of times. You might assume I have a vast collection, and although I do own dozens of varieties, I don't consider myself a collector. Fascination need not be possession. I'm equally happy looking at succulents in a nursery, at a show, or in someone else's garden. In particular, I enjoy capturing and recording succulents' myriad shapes and textures with my camera.

For most of my career, I've written about all sorts of plants. Words are still my first love, but nothing describes a plant or a garden as well as a photo. As I practice this art form, I often think of how "photography" means "writing with light." Camera in hand, I circle a succulent, looking for the best light. In slanted early morning or late afternoon sun, red margins burn neon bright, spinners incandesce, fuzzy filaments shimmer, and leaves reveal glowing hues of rose, orange, purple, and blue. As you might imagine, it was difficult to winnow the selection of photos for this book. So many have merit, or illustrate an important point, and I was continually thinking, "But I *have* to show the *this one!*"

This, my third book about succulents, is a kind of prequel to the previous two. It's a guide for novice enthusiasts, a quick reference for anyone seeking an overview, and a vehicle for presenting design ideas I'm excited about. Throughout, I share my perspective on a subject that has become my passion.

**Part One** explains succulents' many desirable qualities and suggests how you might use the plants to enhance your garden, regardless of its size. You'll discover how top garden designers use succulents as a three-dimensional palette. In addition to what's practical and beautiful, I delve into the bizarre, eye-catching, and collectible. You'll also find out how to keep your succulents looking as good as the day you brought them home from the nursery. These plants survive neglect but when we

tended show their gratitude by being even more glorious.

In [Part Two](#), you'll see step by step how to create succulent centerpieces, bouquets, hanging baskets, and more—all fun and useful projects to enhance your home, to celebrate special occasions, and to give as gifts. It's possible to use succulents in ways unthinkable with other plants. Wait 'til you see Laura Eubanks's moss-and-glue method and how Robyn Foreman turns echeverias into long-lasting rose look-alikes. In [Part Three](#), I present my top one hundred plant picks. Most are succulents I've grown myself and would like you to consider, too. All are readily available (or are fast becoming so) and are easy to grow—providing, of course, you understand a few cultivation basics. No worries. No talent is needed, simply an admiration for succulents, an eagerness to learn, and a willingness to experiment.

Above all, I hope to expand your awareness of beauty and increase your desire to use these fleshy, geometric plants to enhance your outdoor living spaces and to express your unique style. Please don't feel intimidated by succulents that are new to you. If you like them, grow them. I'm betting that in no time you'll be giving cuttings to friends.

And now, it is with pleasure that I present my guide (make that *your* guide) to selecting, growing, and designing with these versatile and intriguing plants. May this book serve to enlighten, entertain, and inspire you.



Teaching workshops is an outgrowth of my work as an author of books about succulents. Danielle Moher's newly planted pot  

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contains blue rose echeveria, 'Calico Kitten' and 'Mini Kitty' crassulas, and burro tail sedum.

## A word about plant names

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Although I am a proponent of calling succulents by their Latin names, I've included their common names wherever possible. This makes the plants easier to remember but also may cause misunderstandings. Common names for succulents are not as accurate as their Latin names, and they are not unique to each plant. Bottle palm (*Beaucarnea recurvata*), for example, is not a palm. Several kinds of succulents have a hens-and-chicks growth habit, but only one has the common name hens-and-chicks (*Sempervivum*).

A Latin name is precise. *Echinocereus triglochidiatus* var. *mojavensis* is commonly known as claret cup cactus, but that mouthful of a Latin name accurately describes the plant. *Echino*, from the Greek, means "bristly like a hedgehog." *Cereus* means "waxy," and ceroid cacti are generally columnar. *Tri* means three, and glochids are spines, so *triglochidiatus* refers to spines arranged in clusters of three. *Mojavensis* is an easy one; it means "from the Mojave desert."

I hope you will familiarize yourself with plants' Latin names. In doing so, you'll gain an appreciation of the usefulness of botanical nomenclature and may even come to prefer it.



# ENJOYING, GROWING, AND DESIGNING WITH SUCCULENTS





## Why Succulents are Seductive



The bold leaves of a variegated (striped) century plant in my garden contrast with green aeoniums and orange aloe flowers.

**IN MY HALF-ACRE GARDEN**, I've grown everything from hybrid tea roses to passion flower vines, and nothing has been as trouble free as succulents.

Because these plants-that-drink-responsibly store water in leaves and stems, they won't wilt if you forget to water them, nor will they miss you when you're away. I no longer give a neighbor a key to my house to come and water my potted plants when I go out of town—not since I switched to succulents. I drench them before I leave, move them out of hot sun if need be, and they're fine for at least two weeks.

Succulents start readily from cuttings or offsets, yet the vast majority are noninvasive. Native to harsh environments, the plants tolerate neglect but flourish when pampered. They're also problem solvers. You may discover, as I have, that succulents do well in challenging parts of your garden.



where other plants have failed.

Most succulents do need protection from scorching sun in summer and freezing temperatures in winter, and prefer dry environments to those that are rainy or humid. But regardless of where you live, containers enable you to grow and enjoy hundreds of varieties. Nearly all succulents do well in pots, and because containers are portable, it's possible to shelter the plants when the weather turns too hot, cold, or wet.



Offsets that surround the main rosette suggest raindrops on water. Blue rose echeveria (*Echeveria imbricata*) is tough enough to be used in garden beds.



Canary Island aeoniums (*Aeonium canariense*) illustrate the repetitive geometry of many succulents. Those shown here have sun-kissed, reddened outer leaves. The plant branches and forms tight clusters of velvety rosettes.

# SURREAL SHAPES, TEXTURES, AND PATTERNS

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Home gardeners now understand what collectors have known all along: due to their architectural and sculptural shapes, succulents are a joy to behold and a delight to design with. A composition of assorted succulents tends to look good right away. It's hard to go wrong with plants that have simple clean lines. Geometric succulents—whether in the garden or in pots—provide great definition and are pleasing to look at year-round.

Many succulents (such as echeverias, sempervivums, aeoniums, and graptopetalums) have rosette shapes that resemble flowers. The plants' overlapping leaves suggest fleshy roses, water lilies, camellias, or daisies. But unlike flowers, they don't suffer from the fade factor. Rosette succulents look the same day in and day out—unless they're in bloom, a lovely bonus. And with leaves that come in pastel hues and blues, it's no wonder succulents are being used in bouquets, centerpieces, and corsages. Rosette succulents also look great paired with flowers in garden beds. And when it comes to creating an eye-catching container display, one large rosette (such as a cabbage-sized ruffled echeveria) often is all you need.

An appealing feature of certain succulents—notably sempervivums and many echeverias—is the hens-and-chicks growth habit. One rosette (the “hen”) sends forth smaller rosettes (the “chicks”). With sempervivums, these often are attached to slender, umbilical-cord-like stems. Over time, a hen and its brood, which soon become hens themselves, will fill a pot, window box, or rock garden. To divide or propagate such succulents, cut or wiggle loose one or more offsets and replant.

With so many shapes, sizes, and textures to choose from, you can select succulents that suit your style, your home, and even an event. Rosette succulents are perfect for settings and occasions at which flowers are traditional; prickly succulents hearken to the spare, desert aesthetic of the Southwest; and agaves and linear succulents (such as sansevierias, and columnar cacti and euphorbias) suit anything sleek and contemporary.

Artists and architects inspired by succulents include Frank Lloyd Wright, who interpreted the saguaro cactus, that icon of the desert Southwest, in a famous abstract stained-glass design. Agaves feature prominently in the landscape of Taliesin West, Wright's winter home and architecture school near Phoenix. One of Georgia O'Keeffe's best-known paintings is of yellow cactus flowers. Mexican artist Diego Rivera, famous for his calla lilies, also depicted cacti and agaves. And during the 1920s, renowned photographer Imogen Cunningham created black-and-white images of agaves, cacti, and aloes that interpret the plants' linear forms via light and shadow.



'Blue Flame' agave, upper left, and graptoverias, lower right, along with kalanchoes in bloom, 'Blue Glow' agave, columnar *Pachocereus pachycladus*, and silver torch cactus (*Cleistocactus strausii*), provide an arresting combination of shapes and textures.



Chicks of mountain stonecrop (*Sempervivum montanum*, center), have short stems, creating a tight colony. Echeveria and pachyveria rosettes complete the composition.



Colorful sunset aloe (*Aloe dorotheae*) has a symmetrical growth pattern and leaves with rickrack edges.

## Edible, herbal, and illegal succulents

Some succulents can be eaten, but most require preparation to be palatable. When consumed raw, some are sour or bitter; others have laxative properties. Two will get you high. One may get you arrested.

**ALOE VERA.** Despite being widely known and grown, no naturally occurring populations of *Aloe vera* exist. The gel is high in vitamin C and reputed to have numerous health benefits. Its mucilaginous texture and bitter taste are improved when the raw gel is diluted by an equal quantity of water. I slice the leaves lengthwise and use the gel to soothe sunburn, being careful not to get the yellow layer (just under the rind) on my clothes. Not only does it stain; if ingested, it causes cramping and diarrhea.



*Aloe vera* is likely native to North Africa, where it has been used as an herb and in cosmetic preparations and lotions since the time of the pharaohs. Supposedly it was integral to Cleopatra's beauty regimen.

**CACTUS.** At my childhood home near San Diego, cactus was a landscape plant favored by my father. It required no irrigation, and installed around the ranch's perimeter formed a thicket that bloomed in spring and served as both firebreak and security fence. Moreover, "When the famine comes, we can eat it," he would say. I didn't realize he wasn't kidding until I saw vendors at an open-air market in Mexico scraping spines off prickly pear cactus pads (nopales) and stacking them for sale. Flowers atop the pads turn into juicy reddish purple fruit that is tasty but filled with indigestible seeds. Both fruit and pads can be eaten raw, but the latter are much

better cooked. Also edible:

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- **ORGAN PIPE CACTUS** (*Stenocereus thurberi*) has red, golf-ball-sized fruit known as pitahaya dulce.
- **DRAGON FRUIT**, also called pitaya (*Hylocereus*), is a tropical, vining cactus with long, flat, scalloped leaves and brilliant red, pink, or yellow fruits. These are ovoid, with green fins that make them look like midcentury science-fiction spaceships. The flesh is white or red with tiny black crunchy seeds. Though popular in Asian cultures, high in antioxidants, and available in farmers' markets throughout southern California, dragon fruit has yet to become popular here. The texture is grainy and the flavor insipid, but it sure looks pretty sliced on a plate.
- **PERUVIAN APPLE CACTUS** (*Cereus repandus*) has sweet, bright pink fruit. Despite also having the common name pitaya for its fruit, this columnar cactus looks entirely different from vining hylocereus.
- **ORCHID CACTI** (*Epiphyllum* species) are tropical cacti grown mainly for their large, vividly hued flowers. Their bases swell into fruit that is similar to that of hylocereus, only smaller.
- **STRAWBERRY CACTUS** (*Echinocereus*) has red or green fruits that, depending on the species, may be strawberry or raspberry flavored, with hints of vanilla.
- **GARAMBULOS** are the berries of *Myrtillocactus geometrizans*. They taste a little like cranberries but are not as tart.



Immature, palm-sized opuntia leaves (nopales) are used in salads and egg dishes in Texas and Latin America.

**CHALK LETTUCE.** *Dudleya edulis* is a California native that has upright, grayish, powdery leaves shaped like green beans. Raw, they have an unpleasant chalky taste; cooked, they're supposedly much more palatable.



**HOODIA.** *Hoodia gordonii* is a stapeliad, a type of succulent with large flowers that smell like rotting meat in order to attract pollinating flies. Long used by indigenous peoples of South Africa to take away hunger pangs on Kalahari hunting trips, hoodia is reputed to have appetite-suppressant qualities. Because of extreme interest in the plant for this reason, trade is restricted.



Several species of hoodia can be eaten raw. Though “cactiform,” these South African succulents are unrelated to cactus.

**PEYOTE.** *Lophophora williamsii* has a long history of use in the religious rituals and medicines of Native Americans and can be used legally today by members of the Native American Church. It is a source of the hallucinogenic drug mescaline and is listed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency as a Schedule I controlled substance (high potential for abuse, no currently accepted medical use, safety undefined, can’t be prescribed). Because of overharvesting, the state of Texas lists peyote as an endangered species.



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