

# Cacti and Succulents: Old Plants for Modern Living

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Consumer interest in cacti and succulents is at an all time high. Although a significant part of current sales are going to hobby collectors of these interesting and unusual plants the major market is to those who have discovered the low care value of cacti and succulents. It seems reasonable to assume that many home plant enthusiasts are tired of the common house plants such as Swedish Ivy, Wandering Jew, and the like. Those who seek something different are finding that cacti and succulents offer an almost inexhaustible choice of interesting plants. Certainly growers who specialize in offering a good selection of these plants are finding that business is better than ever. This increased interest has meant an increase in unusual varieties in the trade. Are you getting your share of this expanding market?

Many retailers seem to shy away from cacti and succulents because they think special conditions are required for success. Actually these plants are among the easiest to grow of all indoor plants. Light and water needs seem to be the area of most misconception.

Many, but not all, cacti are native to the desert where high light is apparent. Succulents are found in a wide range of environments. However, cacti and succulents grown domestically, whether greenhouse, shop, or home do not require the amount of light associated with desert conditions. Actually the first house plants we shade in early spring are these! They will burn much sooner than many "low light" plants. While rather high light is best in an indoor situation it is desirable to supply either indirect or filtered light to avoid burning. I'm not so sure about talking to your plants but your plants most certainly do talk to you — in an easy to read sign language. Cacti and succulents respond rather quickly to insufficient light by making uncharacteristic spindly growth. No big mystery here—just observe the sign language and follow your plant's directions.

Most watering problems are caused by a failure to water enough when needed. While cacti and succulents will tolerate long periods without water, which is nice at vacation time, they do need adequate water during the growing season. When watering ALWAYS be sure to wet the entire soil mass (just like pot mums). It is vital to water early in the day so that the plants and the soil surface dry off before night to avoid rotting. During the growing season (April-October) even daily watering is possible if the rules are followed. Growth can be controlled as easily by water as is usually done by fertilizer practices. Under common indoor conditions we suggest watering well 2-4 times monthly during the growing season and every 4-6 weeks during the dormant season and remember water only when conditions favor quick drying of the plants and the soil surface.

Cacti and most succulents tolerate an almost unbelievable range of temperatures. The major exception are the Euphorbias which offer some outstanding varieties but do not do well in temperatures below 50°F generally. Most others will serve you well from 40° to 90°F and even higher at times. Some cacti are even winter hardy! Many people desire to flower their plants and wonder what the

secret is. The easiest and most successful method we have found is to run them cool (40°-45°F) and dry during the dormant season. We run our greenhouses at 45°F night temperature and enjoy the brilliant flowers on the majority of our plants. Some varieties, however, must have considerable age before flowering. Incidentally, if you've never seen cacti flower you've really missed something. They really put on a show. Often the flowers are bigger than the plants!

Unless you are interested in production, fertilization is far less important than either water or light. Fertilize with half strength house plant food during the growing season. It is better to underfertilize than to overdo.

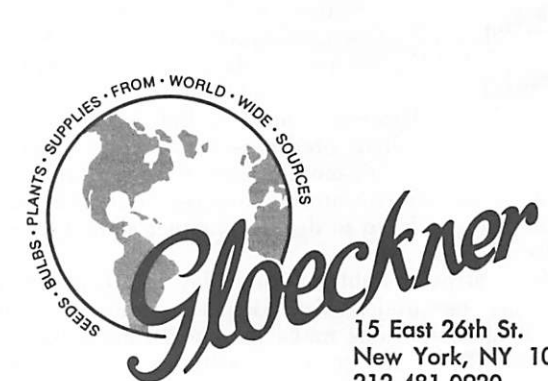
The soil mix should contain humus or peat, sand, and most any amendment which will aid good drainage. We have had outstanding success with 2 part ProMix, 1 part sand, and 1 part fine brick chips. We also use the brick chips as a topdressing to give larger pots and planters a finished look.

A few people still remember when cheap cacti were available from collectors who robbed the desert. Now all states where cacti are natural have very strict controls and all stock must be from nursery and greenhouse production. This has caused a new price structure but consumers have accepted this very well. We are constantly amazed at what they will spend for specimen plants.

Cacti and succulents may be merchandised in a variety of ways. Desert gardens are popular as an alternative to the common dish garden and do not get overgrown for a long time. Low care for both the retailer and consumer is an advantage. Well made desert gardens have an individual character not often found in dish gardens.

Many varieties of both cacti and succulents make outstanding hanging baskets. We are always adding more varieties to our basket selection. Specimen plants offer an alternative to the usual floor plants being sold at cut-rate prices. There is a big increase in sales of these large plants.

If you haven't given cacti and succulents a good chance to show their stuff I suggest that you do it soon. Find some high quality material (price is not the more important factor) and be sure to look for unusual forms, some you might even think are weird, and set up an eye catching display. Success probably won't be instant but our experience is that the potential very definitely is there. Good luck!



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