

# Santa Barbara Cactus and Succulent Society

## The Culture of Cacti and Succulents

### **BASIC SOIL MIX:**

Use one third organic material (leaf mold or humus with finest particles sifted out and used in the garden), one third sand (a coarse type or coarse decomposed granite, never beach or builders sand) and one third porous inorganic material (pumice or perlite). The important requirement is to have a soil mix which is porous and allows for rapid drainage of water. Small amounts of bone and blood meal or timed release fertilizers such as Osmocote or Mag-amp may be added as well as trace elements such as Vim. Small quantities are used because the plant will take time to reestablish and roots may be broken and will take time to become fully active again. Some growers are using a mix such as Supersoil, which contains mostly humus, and combining this with 1/3 to 1/2 of perlite or pumice.

### **CONTAINER:**

Ceramic, unglazed clay pots or plastic are all satisfactory. Glazed pots may be used with great care, provided they drain well. However, a clay pot allows the soil to dry faster than the glazed or plastic type. Any pot should have a bottom drainage hole. A small piece of plastic window screen placed over the hole in the bottom of the pot will hold the soil in and keep unwanted creatures out. If you feel you need to increase drainage you may use a thin layer of pumice or perlite in the bottom of the pot. Use the smallest size container that seems appropriate for the size and shape of the plant. Plants should be repotted as they grow larger or the soil needs to be renewed - usually after one or more years.

### **LIGHT:**

Don't place newly acquired or freshly repotted plants in full sun! They may be damaged if they have been in a more shaded location or just the transplanting shock may require additional protection. The amount of sunlight for normal growing will depend on the plant, and you will have to observe the plant carefully to determine the proper amount and/or research how it grows in the wild.

While strong light is needed for most succulents to reach their full potential and not get leggy, gradual acclimation is the key. Move the plants gradually into the sunlight as you watch for signs of sunburn or bleaching of the stems or leaves. Some plants do well in filtered light areas, and if this is not available, provide protection with shade cloth.

### **VENTILATION:**

All plants need good air circulation. Damp un-ventilated locations are to be avoided.

### **WATERING:**

Remember that most succulents have evolved in nature to be very conservative in their use of water. However, this does not mean they don't need any water. Many of our plants are grown in pots, which confines the roots to a small space. Because the root area is so much smaller than in nature or growing in the landscape, the plants can use fair amounts of water during their growing season. Water the plants until the soil mix is thoroughly moist, then let the plant dry out between waterings.

Water less frequently when the plant is resting or dormant (signs of inactivity - no growth or yellowing of the leaves etc). Summer growing plants are dormant in the cooler months. However, some plants are winter growers and shut down in the dry, hot season. If you are unsure, withhold water and watch the plants. It helps to learn where the plant originated, to find out when the growth time is, for example the rainy season or the summer season.

When the weather is cool and cloudy, err on the side of under-watering. Never water a wet plant. More succulents are killed by over-watering than by any other cause. Being cold and wet simultaneously can be disastrous for many succulents.

#### **PESTS:**

Mealy bugs, mites, aphids (mostly on flower stalks) and scale are the most frequently encountered pests on succulents. Ants spread and tend many of these pests so use control measures for the ants. Snails, slugs and caterpillars may also damage succulents. Consult a local nursery or the local cactus and succulent society for help in controlling pests and for the latest information in regard to the safest sprays.

#### **FERTILIZER:**

When the plants are actively growing, most often spring through early summer, they may be fed with a complete fertilizer. Through late summer use fertilizers with low or zero nitrogen, since you do not want to create "soft" growth when plants are going into winter dormancy. If the succulent is a winter grower, it should be fed at that time and not in the spring and summer. Some growers use one quarter strength fertilizer with every other watering, as long as the plant is actively growing. Other growers use frequent fungicide applications with plants that are known to rot easily

Good culture comes from careful observation of the plant itself. Knowing where the plant originated is also helpful. What are the temperatures - highs and lows, the rainfall and elevation?

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The Santa Barbara Cactus & Succulent Society meets on the first Friday of every month, at 7:30 p.m., at the MacKenzie Park Adult Building (Las Positas near State St.). Our meetings are free and open to the public. We have monthly guest speakers, raffle plants and free cuttings at the meetings. Membership dues are: Family \$14, Individuals \$12. Benefits include a monthly newsletter, library privileges and a free plant at our annual December Holiday Party. For more information contact: John Bleck at 968-5519, Bette Eliason at 967-8205 or Mike McCammon at 966-0536.