

# Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

## FACT SHEET

**Have gardening questions?** Contact the **Master Gardener Help Line.**

Two locations / two ways to contact us:

At *Mass Hort, Wellesley*: [mgghelp@masshort.org](mailto:mgghelp@masshort.org), 617-933-4929

At *Tower Hill Botanic Garden, Boylston*: [hortline@towerhillbg.org](mailto:hortline@towerhillbg.org), 608-869-6111 x104

Please visit our web site for Help Line open hours <http://massmastergardeners.org/what-i-do/>



## Growing Hardy Succulents

The word succulent means “juicy.” In addition to fleshy, waxy leaves and stems, hardy succulent plants have other adaptations that enable them to conserve water, typically including hairy or spiny surfaces, reduced leaf surface areas and a compact columnar or spherical shape.

As long as they thrive in USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 5-6, succulents are wonderful choices for a hot dry southern New England location where other plants struggle. They are easy to propagate, are low maintenance and can be severely neglected and still thrive.

### PLANT SELECTION

It is important to distinguish between hardy and tender succulents: hardy succulents are those that originated in northern climates and do best with a dormant period during cold winter weather; tender ones are not frost-tolerant and must be over-wintered indoors. The focus of this fact sheet is hardy succulents.

When choosing hardy succulents for your garden, be aware that the many, many varieties have a range of drought-, sun- and cold-tolerance. Some can handle extreme drought while others actually do quite well in shade and appreciate a moister environment.

Take care to select plants based on your growing conditions. When in doubt, consult your nursery or conduct online research before you buy.

### GROWING CONDITIONS/CARE

In Zones 5- 6, the most common hardy succulents are hens and chicks, sedums (stonecrops) and ice plants. Although all of these enjoy full sun and are drought-tolerant, succulents are not cactuses: to remain healthy, they need to be watered weekly if there is no rain. In the shade, plants will need less water. Ideally, soil should dry thoroughly between waterings. Too much water is a succulent’s worst nightmare!

Succulents like to be planted in well-drained soil. In areas with lots of clay, mix existing garden soil with one

of the following in a 50-50 ratio: pumice, perlite, coarse grit or sand. In areas with non-clay soil you can improve drainage by incorporating builder’s sand or other coarse material: one part additive to three parts soil. If the soil is already sandy, you can use it as is.

Hardy succulents also can be grown in containers, provided the planting medium is well drained and not overly rich. A good succulent container mix is half peat moss or compost and half drainage material such as those listed above. We recommend also adding bone meal or a low-nitrogen slow-release fertilizer such as 2-10-10. Hardy succulent containers can be over-wintered outdoors as long as the soil doesn’t become soggy and they are protected from drying winds; take care to ensure the container does not break due to the cold.

The most common succulent pest is aphids. Rinse the plant with a strong stream of water; this is often enough to dislodge the aphids.

### HARDY SUCCULENT USES

Succulents lend themselves to all sorts of garden uses. They can be part of a mixed border, and many pair well with ornamental grasses and/or drought-tolerant perennials such as achillea, heuchera, lavender and asters. Some succulents will be at home in rock or gravel gardens. Some can even be tucked into stone walls or crevices between paving stones.

Another beautiful use of hardy succulents is “Living Art”: succulent cuttings placed in a shadow box or wreath form for vertical display. Cuttings take root after a few weeks, and the piece can then be hung or leaned against an outside wall. Succulent Living Art can over-winter outdoors as long as shelter is provided; an unheated garage or shed is ideal.

Start succulent plantings in your garden this year, and you’ll be well on your way to having enough cuttings to make your own Living Art next year!

For a list of sample plants, please turn over.

*The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics.*

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## Growing Hardy Succulents (cont'd.)

The plant lists below were sourced primarily from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden (BBG). For more information about how the BBG created a mixed garden of hardy succulents, perennials and cacti, visit

[http://www.bbg.org/gardening/article/a\\_hardy\\_succulent\\_garden](http://www.bbg.org/gardening/article/a_hardy_succulent_garden)

### Sample Hardy Succulent/Cactus Plants for Zones 5-6

*Cylindropuntia imbricata* (COMMON NAME: walking-stick cholla) – 5 feet tall, 4 feet wide

The hardiest of the larger, shrubby cacti from the southern Rocky Mountains, its magenta flowers appear in summer and develop into handsome yellow seedpods that persist until the following year's bloom.

*Delosperma cooperi* (COMMON NAME: hardy purple ice plant) – 3 inches tall, 18 inches wide

Native to South Africa, this low-growing plant produces rich purple, daisy-like flowers from May until first frost. The fleshy, cylindrical, dark blue-green foliage is evergreen, giving the plant good winter presence.

*Delosperma nubigenum* 'Lesotho' (COMMON NAME: hardy yellow ice plant) – 2 inches tall, 3 feet wide

This ice plant thrives in full sun provided it gets an occasional deep soaking. The Irish-green foliage contrasts nicely with the dominant blues and grays of other succulents, and the shiny yellow spring flowers are dazzling.

*Echinocereus coccineus* (COMMON NAME: claret cup cactus) – 6 inches tall, 18 inches wide

One of the toughest of the "hedgehog cacti," this southwestern U.S. native produces low-growing clusters of thick, spiny, cylindrical gray-green stems. Large coral-red flowers sit atop the stems in early spring.

*Opuntia humifusa* (COMMON NAME: eastern prickly pear) – 12 inches tall, 3 feet wide

Eastern prickly-pear is New England's only native cactus. Relatively low-growing, it has showy yellow flowers, maturing to pinkish-red. Eastern prickly pear needs full sun and extremely dry, well-drained soil.

*Opuntia nicholii* (COMMON NAME: Nichol's prickly pear) – 18 inches tall and wide

Of the scores of hardy prickly pears on offer in nurseries, this upright, nearly crimson-red species from northern Arizona is especially refulgent.

*Sedum reflexum* (COMMON NAME: blue spruce sedum) – 12 inches tall, 10 inches wide

This Mediterranean native's small light blue-gray leaves are always striking. Its early-summer clusters of chartreuse flowers can be used to set off pink and red blooms of nearby plants.

*Sempervivum tectorum* (COMMON NAME: hens and chicks) – 4 inches tall, 12 inches wide

This common garden species is extremely heat- and drought-tolerant — not to mention cold hardy. Sporting rosettes of gray-green foliage, it produces star-shaped red blossoms in summer.

### Sample Non-Succulent Plants for a Mixed Border

*Eriogonum corymbosum* (COMMON NAME: lacy buckwheat) – 4 feet tall and wide

This shrubby native forms a large gray mound of foliage and boasts huge, flat-topped white flower clusters in August.

*Gazania linearis* (COMMON NAME: treasure flower) – 4 inches tall, 15 inches wide

A very hardy South African perennial, it bears dark green, strap-like leaves and 3-inch-wide bright yellow summer flowers.

*Oenothera caespitosa* (COMMON NAME: white evening primrose) – 1 foot tall, 2 feet wide

This western U.S. native forms mounds of gray-green foliage and offers fragrant white to pink blossoms in early summer.