

## Winning Plant Combination: Succulents

Carol Carraux

Close to thirty years ago, our first brand-new home had a window box feature. I was so excited with its possibilities and entertained many dreams how to fill it full of beautiful house plants. Little did I realize, however, a west facing window in Katy, Texas, where the box was situated, would cook anything planted there! Soon I became a huge fan of succulents and cacti. I remember my elation when starting an assortment of cacti seeds, a mail-in offer from a magazine, and having them grow, and grow . . . and grow. From Texas we moved to Connecticut and my cacti collection was weeded off to friends and family to remain in hot and sunny Texas.



Eight years ago, our move to Charlotte, NC, proved to be another landscape and gardening challenge. Once again we were transplanted into a new home with the top soil of its landscape scraped off, leaving me with hard, compacted clay. During the first year, one of my only successes was with Sedum, *Hylotelephium* 'Autumn Joy'. So began my new interest in plants that survive despite drought, being forgotten and horrible growing conditions.

Each of my winning plant combinations includes many succulents: Sedums and Cacti and more. They are grouped together, either inside or out, weather depending. Some are in separate pots, some share pots, but always clay pots—a good way to not over water.

One of my favorite combinations is a Jade Plant, *Crassula ovata*, bonsai style with Moss Rose, *Portulaca grandiflora* at the base. A Christmas Cactus, *Scumbergera hybrid*, is nestled with an Oasis or ZZ plant, *Zamioculcus zamiifolia*, and with a spiky skyline Snake Plant, *Sansserveria cylindrica*. The textural differences are fun and interesting. I have two bowl-shaped pots of mixed cacti that include Living Rocks, *Lithops karasmontana mickbergensis*, Bishops Cap, *Astrophytum myriostigma*, Baby Toes, *Crassula monstrosa*, Hen and Chicks, *Sempervivum tectorum*, String of Pearls, *Senecio radicans*, Bear Paws, *Cotyledo tomentosa*, Flapjacks, *Kolanchoe thyrsiflora*, and other assorted cacti. The variation of design, texture and color makes them look like living quilts.

*Aloe vera* is waiting for me to pluck and squeeze when I get a burn or cut, and the Pencil Bush, *Euphorbia triucalli*, looms behind and above. An African Milk Tree, *Euphorbia ingens*, is about four feet tall, and looks great in the corner of the sunroom now, and will return to a wind-protected corner of the back deck when warmer weather continues. A large specimen of the Milk Tree is impressive at Daniel Stowe Botanical Gardens in the Orchid Pavilion, and helped me identify what it was. The Frangipani, *Plumeria rubra* with a ground cover of small Sedum, *Sedum lineare*, is stowed in the crawl space waiting for warmer weather, but the remembrance of its fragrance and the beauty of the flower have me anticipating its emergence once again. Desert Rose, *Adenium obesum*, is a bulbous beauty, not doing much this time of year, but come July-August, it will be showing off its outrageous red and abundant flowers. Other interesting succulents in my collection include Starfish Cactus, *Asclepradaceae staphelia grand flora*, and Devils Backbone, *Pedilanthus tithymaloides smallii*.



The biggest downfall with succulents is too much water. A sandy soil mixture is a necessity, as well as clay pots, with adequate drainage. Many succulents can rest during winter without receiving much light at all; but acclimating them back into sunlight in spring can be trying, as the foliage can get burned. I don't find it necessary to fertilize, but if desired, a 2-7-7 cactus plant food is recommended. During the summer months all remain outdoors and I rarely have to

water them, as the occasional rain and morning dews provide enough moisture. Finding assortments of succulents and cacti is not difficult. In fact, some of my favorites have come from a large discount big box store that offers many items at roll-back prices! Many garden shops are realizing the excellent potential of low-care plants also. Then too, one can always find specific plants via the Internet. Interesting plant selections of succulents and cacti are readily available.

During winter, my winning combination plants receive little attention nor water, placed to gather as much sun as possible. They are happy hanging out inside, providing green, pink and purple interest until such time as they may once again thrive in the summer heat. It's not quite Texas on the back deck of my new home near Lake Wylie, SC, but it does get hot in this USDA Hardiness Zone 7b location—so having combinations of “laughing at the drought” plants is a win!  
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Pictures of succulent dish gardens used in this article were taken by Carol Carraux; used with permission.