

For the last few years, succulents and cacti have been popping up everywhere. In landscaping, weddings, workplaces, I can't even go grocery shopping without running into a display of succulents for sale. Not that I'm complaining, they are some of my favorite plants, and I love seeing more plants in personal spaces like apartments and offices. However, the number one comment that I get when I tell people that I'm a horticulturist is that they like plants but can't keep them alive. On behalf of the succulents, I've compiled some helpful hints to keeping them alive.

First, I should clarify the difference between cacti and succulents. A succulent is any plant that has enlarged leaves or stems that are used for water retention. Cacti are a specific type of succulent that have areoles, which are structures from which flowers, spines and stems grow. Areoles with spines look similar to hedgehogs. All cacti are succulents but not all succulents are cacti.

When choosing a succulent to buy, the first thing I look at is the color. Unless it is variegated, making it part yellow and part green, the plant color should be even throughout the plant. The next thing to look at is if the growth pattern is even. If it is leaning one way or another, this indicates that the succulent has been in an environment with inadequate lighting and may be difficult to correct. The skin of the succulent should be smooth and the leaves should look full, not shriveled or wrinkled. If the plant is showing signs of new growth, that is a sign that it is in a good environment.

Arguably one of the most important parts of growing plants is watering. It affects photosynthesis, respiration, the movement of nutrients into and through the plant, the list goes on and on. There is no conclusive way to determine how often to water your succulent, because it depends on many different variables such as amount of sunlight, air flow, the succulent itself, and many other factors. The best way to determine if the succulent needs watered during its active season is to touch the soil. If the top of the soil is dry, then dig down about an inch. If it is still completely dry, it is probably time to water the succulent. If there is any doubt about whether or not the soil is damp or not, don't water. With succulents it is better to err on the side of under-watering than overwatering. There should also be a noticeable weight difference between the pot of a dry succulent and one that has just been watered. Most, but not all succulents are from arid desert conditions, so it is best if the soil is allowed to dry completely, then soak the soil until water comes out the holes in the bottom of the pot. If the pot does not have drainage holes, be sure to check that the succulent isn't sitting in standing water after it gets watered. The same goes for if a pot with holes is sitting in another container to catch water. If a succulent sits in sopping wet soil, it is at higher risk for root rot. I also allow the water that I am going to use to water my plants to sit for a few days before I use it so that the chlorine and fluoride in the water will evaporate.

Like all other plants, some succulents can tolerate low-light conditions and some do better in bright light. As a general rule, succulents should be placed in a south-facing window if at all possible. If the plant is inside, I recommend giving it a quarter-turn every time that you water so it will grow evenly. Over time, the plant will lean toward the sunlight, but turning the plant will cause it to lean evenly. Outside, succulents need bright indirect sunlight, but be sure to acclimate them first. Plants can and will sunburn if not properly acclimated to hot temperatures.

There are other factors to growing a successful succulent, such as fertilizer and potting media, but this should give you a great start. For more information on succulents, contact Miranda Earnest at the Buffalo County Extension Office, 308-236-1235 or mearnest2@unl.edu.