

JEWEL BOX SUCCULENTS

There is a whole world of succulents out there that are not just for the desert anymore.

BY MAUREEN GILMER



Top: Rich displays of high-color bedding succulents can be visually irresistible to customers looking for unique additions to their summer compositions. **Middle:** Clean form and vivid red margins make this *Kalanchoe thrysiflora* 'Bronze Sculpture' popular with gardeners and interior decorators. **Bottom:** Many colorful succulents such as these *Aeonium atropurpureum* change form when they bolt to flower; (Photos courtesy of Maureen Gilmer)

If there is a looking glass world of horticulture, it is surely the realm of succulents. You can spend your whole life in the plant business and still know little or nothing about them. And yet, these are the darlings of designers who look for season-long color without flowers. Their striking hues coupled with exciting geometric forms have returned succulents to the landscape as indispensable seasonal accents.

No longer relegated to hothouse or desert climates, succulents are in demand both in ground or pots, indoors or out, treated as annuals or perennials. They are the crowning glory of Thomas Hobbs' fabulous book, *The Jewel Box Garden*, providing a dry, frost-free arid climate is not essential to success or interested customers.

Cold-hardy alpine species of sedum and sempervivum have long been a part of the rock garden plant palette. They remain hotter than ever but in a new context. The star performers in gardens like Hobbs are the succulents that offer bright color and striking forms.

VARIETIES

Echeverias. The hot spot of jewel box gardens are the echeverias. Their vivid hues offer season-long color without the benefit of blooms. Of the larger varieties, *E. imbricata* produces vivid red coloring and ruffled edges. Many of its resulting cultivars with progressively redder hues overall make outstanding specimens in garden shop compositions. But like ornamental kale, many echeverias bolt and bloom, and while this spike is exotic in its own right, the rosette is spoiled. That underscores their value as a seasonal annual that belongs in outdoor bedding plant displays after last frost. Gardeners are now combining them with traditional annuals to achieve the luscious jewel box effect.

While echeverias make fine garden plants, they have become very popular for table center-



A wide range of gold tinted sedums provide perfect materials for hanging baskets and trough gardens.

pieces. Interior decorators find them an alternative to orchids. This increases winter sales potential and year-round interior plant markets. They prove valuable in the transitional periods when color is hard to come by.

Flapjacks. Commonly called flapjacks, large flat disk-shaped leaves of *Kalanchoe thrysifolia* are a modern designer's dream. Near perfectly round blue-green leaves are edged in vibrant red that grows more pronounced in cooler temperatures.

Aeonium. There is no shortage of blue-tinted succulents, which provide light values when paired with less common dark red and bronze aeoniums. The top choice is deep purple *Aeonium atropurpureum* hybrids. They are the succulent counterpart to the deep purple heucheras and are used much the same way in color compositions. These make outstanding additions to succulent color bowls or when combined with traditional short stature annuals.

Firesticks. Celebrity landscape designers love firesticks. Their fine texture, upright habit and adaptation to garden soil has made them permanent plants in warm winter regions. Elsewhere they are outstanding choices for pots and troughs. This is a brightly colored cultivar of the larger green "pencil tree," *Euphorbia trucalli*. Firestick 'Rosea' grows far brighter in the cooler temperatures and short days of winter. Growers produce them in small 3-inch pots that make ideal jewel box candidates or for streamlined modern garden design. Firesticks offer high contrast dynamics against large-leaf green backgrounds in tropical looking settings.

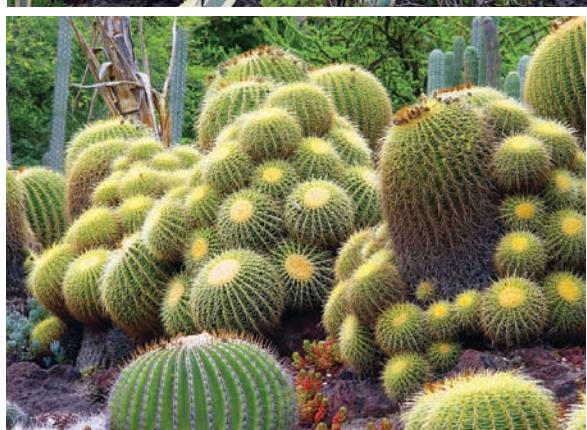
Agave. The big movers and shakers are the striped forms of *Agave americana*. These are cherished for their very large potted specimens in trendy BBC garden shows and in upscale British gardens. Nearly all agaves bloom but once at the end of their life span. While other rosette succulents are spoiled by bolting, you can count on agaves to retain their form for 20 years or more.

Is it a cactus or a euphorbia?

Nick the plant. If it bleeds white latex it is euphorbia. This toxic latex discourages foraging wildlife. It may even cause skin rashes on human skin, so handle firesticks and other euphorbia species with care. If it's a cactus, the plant bleeds clear or green juice.

The combination of vivid golden-yellow margins and bright green leaves make *A. americana* 'Variegata' a graphic feast. It's smaller, but more architectural cousin, *A. americana* medio-picta, is a soft blue-green with wide central variegation in creamy off-white. Its smaller size and graceful arched leaves make it an ideal potted candidate.

Echinocactus. Cacti constitute about half of all succulents, but these plants are not nearly as colorful out of bloom. The exception is the golden barrel cactus, *Echinocactus grusonii*. This plant has long been coveted in Southwestern gardens, but the market for it has exploded in Asia. Its golden color is thought to be lucky, and if grown in the home, the cactus brings prosperity. Where there are strong Asian communities, golden barrel seedlings are an easy sell. The large specimens are highly prized for potted gardens and interiors.



Top: Temperatures and exposure, as well as individual plants, can cause variations in the hues of *Euphorbia trucalli* 'Rosea'. **Middle:** Vivid golden yellow margins make this old specimen of *Agave americana* 'Variegata' a stand out against bold background colors. **Bottom:** Designers use golden barrel cactus in large colonies to compound the color and create dramatic effects.

Sansevieria. Two forms of mother-in-law tongues are surging again as the next big plant trend. The bright yellow variegated *Sansevieria trifasciata* 'Laurentii' is well known as a houseplant but is now summer garden color for shade with extraordinary linear form. Equally exciting is the silvery blue *S. trifasciata* 'Moonglow'. It is a mid-century modern signature plant and traditionally grown in terra cotta pots in Spanish gardens. Both make equally good houseplants to extend sales in the off-season.

GETTING STARTED

Getting started in succulents begins with changing the way you mentally group these plants. In the past they were nearly always displayed with cacti. The jewel box approach is to see them as ephemeral sources of color in the summer garden. Choosing more brilliant hued varieties is better than more intriguing forms of less brilliant species because it's the color that sells. Those cultivars of aeonium, crassula, echeveria, sedum and sempervivum will be perfectly sized to fit into color bowls and baskets with bedding annuals.

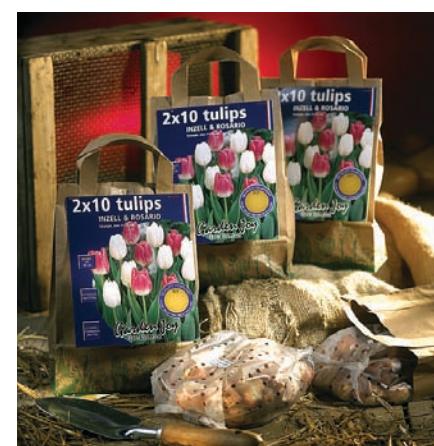
If there is one cultural requirement for this group of plants it's drainage. It is wise to stock potting soil formulated for cactus, which ensures fast water movement through pots. Encourage customers to use pot feet or spacers to keep drain holes free and clear. Discourage overly generous pot sizes because succulent plants do not need as much root space. Wet soil at the bottom of a deep pot can lead to rot.

The emergence of succulents as color bedding plants has created a new sector that offers fresh opportunities for sales. In some garden centers the interest has grown far beyond color as customers become enchanted by this distinctive group of plants. A decade ago cacti and succulents were the realm of desert rats and plant collectors, but this has clearly changed. Today they are visual jewels freshly appreciated for their exotic, mysterious uniqueness that ultimately sells. ☺

Maureen Gilmer is an author and tv personality in Palm Springs, Calif. She appears regularly on Do It Yourself Network's (DIY) "Weekend Gardening," a program featuring weekend projects for the intermediate gardener to make gardens thrive. She can be reached by E-mail at mo@moplants.com.

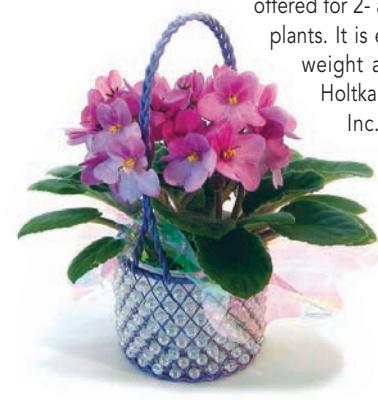
Combo pack

The Garden Joy Combo Pack is new packaging with multiple color combinations. Packages contain two varieties of bulbs individually packed. This item can also be sold as a gift package. De Vroomen Holland. (847) 395-9911. **Write in 1592**



Beaded basket

This year a new Glass Beaded Basket, woven with wire, in white and two pastel colors will be offered for 2- and 4-inch potted plants. It is easy to ship, light weight and unbreakable. Holtkamp Greenhouses, Inc. (800) 443-2290. **Write in 1595**

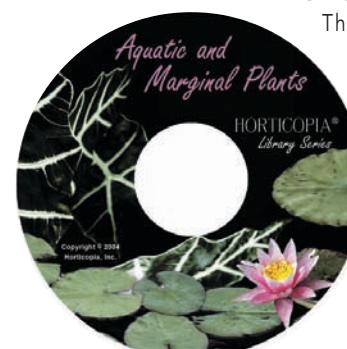


Rose

Available in spring 2005, the double-blooming Double Knock Out 'RADTKO' rose PPAF is compact and upright, with petal counts of 18-25. Double Knock Out presents a rich cherry-red inflorescence from June to frost and green foliage almost year-round. For Zones 5-10, it offers disease and pest resistance, drought and humidity tolerance, winter hardiness, shade tolerance and self-cleaning. It works well for single plantings or as compact borders. Novalis. (800) 845-2065. **Write in 1600**



Plant CD



The Library of Aquatic and Marginal Plants is the second specialty library in the Horticopia Professional Library series. The new library features more than 800 photographs for more than 450 plants used in ponds, pond margins and bogs. Horticopia. (800) 560-6186. **Write in 1596** ♦