

CACTUS & SUCCULENT CARE

Commonly Asked Questions

There is a common misconception that all cacti and succulents grow best in full sun, planted in pure sand, and never need much water or nutrients. In reality, most kinds can *survive* much neglect, but will *thrive* under better conditions.

1. How often do I need to water?

The exact amount of time between watering will vary according to a number of environmental factors, such as heat, light, and humidity. Naturally, the hotter and brighter the environment is, the more often water will be required. It's OK to allow the soil to become completely dry before watering, *unless* your plants are in small pots exposed to intense summer heat and light conditions. Small potted cacti or succulents grown in such intense environmental conditions will require water and fertilizer most frequently, before the soil completely dries out.

2. But I thought cactus plants don't ever need water!

They can *survive* for a long time without water, but *thrive* with a little more care. Plants that are allowed to stay dry for a long period of time will lose their roots due to complete dehydration. When you finally water, those dead roots will rot, and the whole plant may rot. Plants that are grown in pots need more frequent watering than plants that are well established in the ground, due to the size of their root systems.

3. What is over watering?

Over watering pertains to *frequency* of application, *not* how much you apply. When you water, do a thorough job... *thoroughly* soak the soil evenly so that all roots are well moistened. Soak the soil well, just like a thunderstorm would. Then wait until the soil gets fairly dry before you water again.

4. Can succulents survive cold weather/freezing?

Most succulents fare best during the winter if kept especially dry. Wet and cold conditions can be deadly... they don't like wet feet when it's cold... would you? During the winter water only if you must (if plant is obviously looking shriveled or stressed for moisture), and then try to pick a time to water when temperatures are on a warming trend (definitely above 40° at night). Plants in pots are more likely to suffer from "wet feet"/freezing than plants that are well established in the ground.

Of course, there's not much you can do if it rains, but plants that are in a well drained soil mix will dry out fastest, so it pays to add lots of porous perlite or pumice to soil when re-planting. This is like buying "insurance" against winter damage. Potted plants fare best if sheltered under the eaves of the house where some protection from rain and frost is provided. Also, the area under the eaves has the added benefit of some heat radiated from the walls of the house.

5. Do I need to re-pot my cacti?

It is a good idea to re-pot cacti and succulents into as large a pot as practical, but *only* if you are going to provide lots of heat and light (outdoors). This will allow the plants to grow

fast and develop substantial root systems. The larger pot size is easier to maintain because it will hold adequate moisture and nutrients. Smaller pots get depleted of moisture and nutrients quickly, and may require water very often during hot weather in order to prevent sun scorch and discoloration.

Plants that are maintained *indoors* are best left in as small a pot as possible, since lower light and temperatures of most indoor environments are not apt to allow plants to dry out as quickly... Don't re-pot plants into larger pots as this provides too much soil for moisture retention, and so it takes too long to dry out. If you *must* re-pot a plant for indoor use, place it outdoors for a few weeks so that roots can grow into and fill up the new soil mass. Succulent plants/cacti need bright light and warm temperatures for roots to grow into new soil adequately. Move a plant indoors only after you are sure that it has rooted well.

6. What time of year is best for re-potting?

You can pot plants into bigger pots any time of the year that you can provide adequate warmth and light for good root development. The winter months are the worst time; spring and summer are the best.

7. Do I need to fertilize?

If plants are growing in warm/bright conditions, they will respond with bright new growth if fertilized regularly during warm weather. Try using 20-20-20 general purpose water soluble fertilizer at approximately 1/8 tablespoon per gallon of water —every time that you water during warm weather.

Plants indoors may be fertilized occasionally too, but the lower the light and temperature, the less often you should fertilize.

8. How much light do these plants need?

Cacti and succulents show their best growth in bright light, however most varieties are remarkably adaptable to shade.

For plants maintained in the brightest locations, be sure to increase the watering and fertilizing frequency or the moisture and nutrient holding capacity of their soil. This is critical to prevention of sunburned or bleached out areas on the sunny side of the plants.

On the opposite extreme, plants grown under insufficient lighting may etiolate (stretch out to try to get more light), resulting in pale, narrow, weak growth.

Never suddenly move a plant from low light levels to a position where it gets direct, intense sunlight... acclimatize to light gradually to avoid scorching.

All aspects of plant culture (light, temperature, soil, water, nutrients) are interrelated and must be considered to achieve optimum results.