

BABYING WHAT'S INSIDE THE POT

Please....talk to them – they can hear you

Water

Cacti and succulents like regular watering. For most, the period of growth is from spring to fall.

While they are growing, plants should be watered by giving the soil a thorough and deep soak, so that the water runs out of the 'drainage holes' of the pots. Re-water the plants after all of the soil, from top to bottom of pot, has dried out. During the growing season, you may have to water every 1-2 weeks. This will vary depending on the amount of soil in the pot and how much heat and light the plant receives. A soil moisture meter can be used to help gauge when the soil at the bottom of the pot has dried out.

Many plants rest (dormant) from late fall to early spring - when temperatures are cool and daylight length is short, as well as during mid-summer - when it's sizzling. During the rest period, increase the interval between each watering and let the potting mixture dry out between them. Some say that during dormancy, cacti and succulents should be given just enough water so that they show no sign of shriveling. If your plants are kept indoors on a windowsill in a heated room during the winter, they will need more water than if they were over-wintered outdoors. In any case, do not fertilize your plants during dormancy.

Just like everything else in life there are exceptions to the above, as some cacti and, especially some succulents, are winter growers.

Fertilizer

During the growing season, a balanced fertilizer can be added to the water for each watering. A balanced fertilizer is one that has roughly equal proportions of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium. A 10-10-10 fertilizer diluted to 1/4 strength.

Light

They want bright light, but not direct sunlight, especially in conjunction with high temperatures. While optimal lighting conditions depend on species, there are some general signs that may indicate your plant is getting either too much or too little light.

Too much light: When your plant is getting too much light, it can appear "off color," taking on a "bleached out" look, or turning yellow or even orangish. Keep in mind that these signs can also indicate other stresses, such as disease or too much water.

Too little light: If your plant is receiving too little light, it might etiolate and/or appear to really reach for the light source. (Etiolation is the condition where a plant becomes "drawn". For example, a cactus plant that is normally round begins to look as if it is being stretched out from the growing point at its center). Your plant will suffer if left in such light conditions for very long. Note that in most cases, it is quite normal for a plant to slowly grow toward the light. What you want to avoid is the condition where it is really reaching for the light. For example, if your columnar cactus is bent toward the window at 90°, it's trying to tell you something.

Soil Mix

Cactus and succulent potting mixes are available commercially. There are some basic characteristics that a potting mix for cacti and succulents should possess. The soil should drain very well. You can create your own mix by combining 1/3 soil, 1/3 sand, and 1/3 grit.

The sand component should be horticultural grade, relatively coarse, and sharp. For the grit component, horticultural pumice or perlite is the best.

Repotting

Ideally, your plants should be repotted every year so that you can provide them with fresh soil, inspect and address problems with their root systems, and move them to bigger pots if necessary.

To repot, invert the pot and gently tap it to loosen the soil and roots from the pot. If the plant is really root-bound, you might need to resort to breaking the pot to get the plant out. Be careful when doing this, as you want to minimize damage to the roots.

Repot the plant into the new pot, then place the plant in the pot with dry, fresh soil mix formulated for cacti and succulents. Don't water the plant right away. Instead, allow the plant to rest out of direct sunlight for a week or two before watering it. This allows any roots that were damaged to heal, as unhealed wet roots are very susceptible to bacterial or fungal infections.

Pests

Cacti and succulents are tough plants. They are, however, not without their problems. Aphids, snails, slugs, thrips, and nematodes are among some of the pests that can leave their mark on your plants.

Mealybug: are tiny insects about 0.1-inch (3mm) in length, which shroud themselves in an oval-shaped, cottony covering. Minor infestations can be handled by dabbing them with a cotton swab dipped in rubbing alcohol. Systemic insecticides are often used to control widespread mealybug attacks.

Spider mites: are very tiny. These pests are often found in their whitish webs, often spun close to the plant's surface. Infected plants often develop yellowish spots which later turn rusty brown scarring the plant. Overhead watering and misting are often listed as a cure for spider mite problems. Mites are not insects, so insecticides often have little effect on them. The use of a miticide, however, is recommended for widespread problems. Make sure to use it at least once a week for three weeks to kill the full cycle of the spider mites, from eggs to adults.

Scale: are pinhead-size insects that appear as raised tan or brown spots resembling marine limpet shells. The shells are hard coverings that protect the insects underneath. Outbreaks of scale can be treated similarly to mealybug infestations.

Fungus gnats: are often a nuisance rather than a problem. When present, they are small black flies that can often be seen on and around the surface of the soil. In some cases, mostly when seedlings are involved, their larvae can cause damage and plant loss.
