

Whether on a sunny dining room table, hanging on a front door or potted up around the yard, succulents are the newfound fun plants for today's consumers.

Succulents: Plants for Today's Consumers

By Chris Berg

No longer limited to the gardens of the Southwest, gardeners are finding new and creative ways to use nature's most durable plants. As we read month after month about how people are downsizing on their space and are more and more starved for time, these succulents are ideal for the time crunched, space deprived or even just plain lazy gardener who wants the green in their life but doesn't have the time to put into it.

Originally, I began gardening with succulents because they were structurally amusing. The dark daisy-like rosettes of 'Zwartkop' aeonium dancing on their odd gangly stems, or the striking patterns and growth habits of 'Gator' aloe with these scale-like bands across the foliage. The other joy was with their slow and controlled growth habits so that I could fit them in virtually any situation from large specimen agaves in the landscape to small pots all over my patio to sticking liners in moss forms creating living art to keep inside or out.



How to Grow the Perfect Potted Succulent

While there are a wide variety of plant habits, growth rates and other cultural attributes, following a few simple guidelines will provide you with a successful crop of superior succulents. First step is to recognize the growth rate of different varieties in your climate and at any given time of the year. Sedum, for instance, will finish much faster than an agave. To ensure an evenly timed crop, either stagger shipments from your supplier or order in different cell sizes to give the slower crops a head start.

Growing temperature: 65 to 72° F days and 50 to 60° F nights. As with any crop, the ideal temperature is a balance of crop time and quality. Plants grown under bright light at lower temperatures will have extended crop times, but yield the brightest foliage colors.

Light exposure: For most succulents, grow in partial shade during the hot summer months to avoid sun-burning, or white bleached spots. For the rest of the year, full sun will give the best foliage colors.

Moisture levels: Growing media should contain 30 percent

of a draining agent such as perlite or pumice. Plants should be well watered during irrigation, but more importantly, allow media to dry completely between waterings. Plants go dormant in the winter, thus a much slower uptake of water, so less frequent irrigation will be required.

Fertilizer: A well-balanced fertilizer, such as 15-5-15, is recommended at a rate of 150-ppm nitrogen during the active growing months, but with intermittent breaks to avoid a buildup of salts. For example, constant liquid feed during the months of March through May, break from July through August, and then resume feed from September through November and break again for the dormant months of winter, December through February.

Finish times: Crop times can vary greatly depending on the time of year, variety and beginning cell size, but overall, growers should expect the following:

4- to 5-inch: 10 to 12 weeks
Gallon: 12 to 16 weeks
8-inch: 14 to 18 weeks
10- to 12-inch: 18 to 22 weeks

Diverse Benefits

It wasn't until putting several of these plants together that I truly realized the diversity of colors and textures in their class alone. However, I'm a gardener that likes a variety of plants and I became quite surprised at how well they all combined with other flowering, lower-water use annuals. The gray-blue tones of agaves complemented by an under planting of vibrant purple verbenas, or the dusty rose-colored rosettes of echeveria combined with the terra cotta hues of calibrachoa were quite remarkable.



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Aside from their dramatic design elements, I've come across the real consumer benefits of these plants — they're easy! As a traveling gardener, I often need to rely on the help of my neighbor to come over and water my containers. In her defense, I have a daunting amount of containers and hitting them all each day when it's hot and dry here in southern California is quite the challenge. When I came home last year from our industry pilgrimage to Columbus, Ohio, the succulents still looked amazing. The petunias...not so much. These plants are native to some of the harshest conditions in the world, so surviving on any one of our patios across North America should be a breeze.

Relaying the Message

So just how do you educate the consumer to care for their succulent gardens? The most important rule is to really just ignore them. Sure they like a good drink

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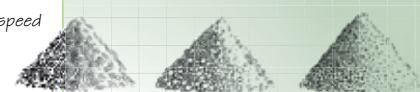
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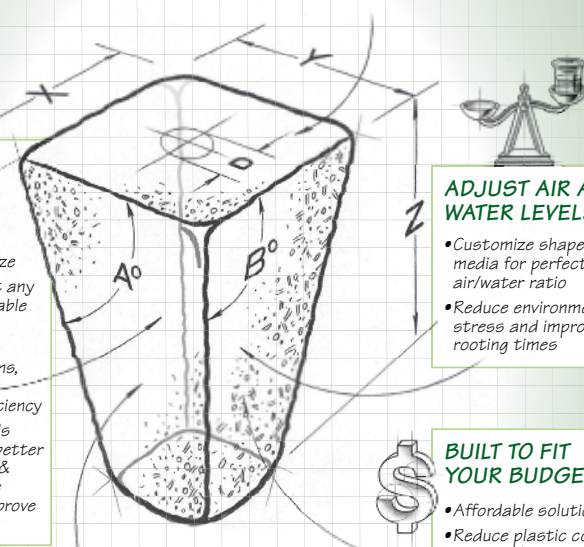
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now and then, but when taking off on a summer vacation, don't worry. These will be the plants that will be happier when you get home than when you left. The plants need a low amount of fertilizer during their active growing cycle, which is spring and summer, and not at all when the plants are in rest mode during the winter months.

How can retailers sell this category in the garden center? First rule — make it fun. Show consumers that these plants can be used to garden where they thought no garden could ever exist — rooftops, pathways, or even trendy dining tables. And for gardeners that do have plenty of outdoor space, help them to keep it simple. It's best to just use two or three dramatic varieties for accents, while massing a lot of smaller ones underneath. Good examples for extraordinary specimen plants would be large agaves, aeoniums, kalanchoes, dyckias and echeverias. For the under story of fill-in plants, use a collection of smaller echeverias, aloes, portulacas, sedums and sempervivums.


While the number of succulent species out there seems to be endless, I've listed my favorite five here that I feel every garden center should include in their collection:

***Aeonium arboreum* 'Zwartkop'** — Long, elegant, caramel-colored stems hold large rosettes of black leaves. These plants are often looked at as the daisies of the succulent garden. The black foliage has a brilliant contrast against other gold leaved plants like sedum 'Angelina'. Plants are hardy to 30° F and will tolerate both full sun and partial shade.

***Agave geminiflora* 'Rasta Man'** — Agaves are known for their hardiness and tolerance of adverse conditions. This particular variety sports hundreds of narrow, dark-green leaves that are adorned with bright white filaments that glow in the light. Plants form a dense rounded habit that will mature 2 to 3 feet tall and wide. 'Rasta Man' is hardy to 25° F.

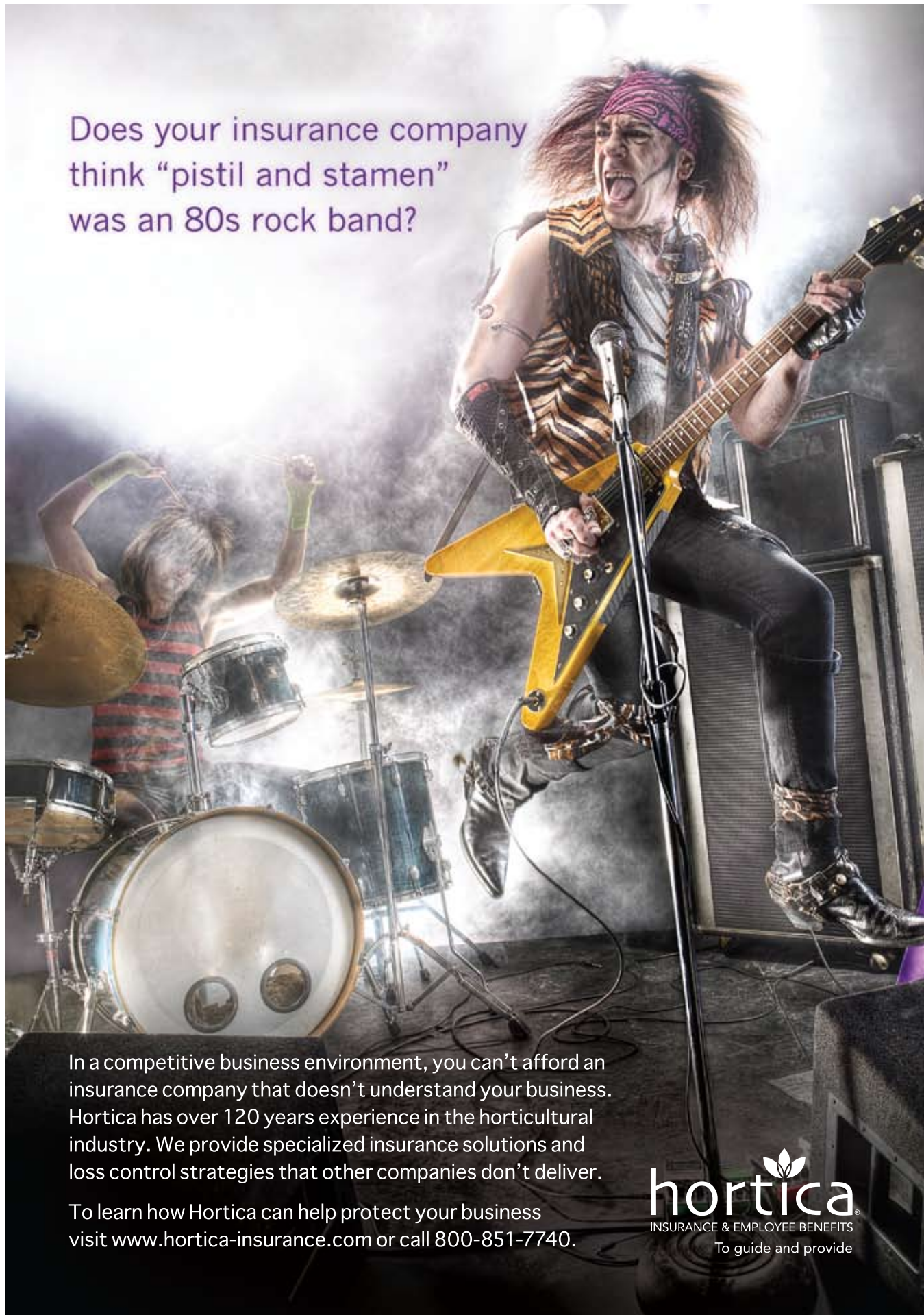
***Aloe variegata* 'Gator'** — It's difficult to choose which is more eye-catching with this aloe — the unique white reptile-like markings or the triangular growth habit. Like the species, the rosettes often form in clusters, and sport beautiful red flowers in mid to late winter. Gator is best planted with some light summer shade.

***Echeveria* 'Perle Von Nürnberg'** — A beautiful rosette forming succulent that has dusty rose-colored leaves. In summer, the coral-pink flowers appear on 1-foot-long reddish stemmed inflorescences. Plant in full sun, part shade or on a sunny windowsill indoors. Plants are hardy to 25° F.

***Euphorbia tirucalli* 'Firesticks'** — Also known as the Red Pencil Tree, 'Firesticks' has numerous pencil-thin branches that are bright red during cool temperatures, then fading to a golden copper color in summer. This plant lacks the chlorophyll of the original species, and therefore grows slower. 'Firesticks' is hardy to 30 to 32° F. 

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