THE SUCCULENT GARDEN

Every year the weather gets hotter and drier and for yet another summer we are faced with water restrictions. Many gardeners will have to change their ways of gardening, and I suggest replacing water-thirsty plants with succulents. Most of the towns up the West Coast and in the Karoo have been gardening this way for decades, but unfortunately, besides a few specialist nurseries, not many garden centres supply succulents, nor are a big variety of succulents propagated by growers. There are however, many easy-to-grow succulents that look great in a garden, and I have listed a few of the best, according to size.

The bigger succulents can be used as feature plants, like Aloe ferox, A. marlothii and A. barberae (tree aloe). These three aloes are upright and make excellent features whether they are planted on their own or in groups. They flower from late autumn and peak in winter when their red or orange flowers brighten up any garden. Although they eventually reach 3 m in height, they are relatively slow growing. Other attractive, but more difficult to obtain aloes that reach 3 m are Aloe plicatilis (fan aloe) and A. dichotoma (the quiver tree or kokerboom).

Medium sized succulents that grow from 1,5-2 m are vital to any succulent garden as they bridge the gap between the taller plants and the groundcovers. The easiest succulents to grow in this category are Aloe arborescens, Crassula ovata and Portulacaria afra (spekboom or olifantskos). These plants are often used as hedges or for screening a wall, especially on a hot, north-facing aspect. The spekboom is very attractive with its small round leaves and Aloe arborescens gives a beautiful display of red flowers in winter, Crassula ovata has a trunk similar to that of a baobab tree.

Another fascinating medium sized succulent is Cyphostemma juttae (desert grape) that is found from the Northern Cape up to the Namib Desert. This peculiar plant has a thick, gnarled stem and after flowering, produces large bunches of red or purple fruits that look like grapes. Mountain Pride butterfly (Menitis talbaghia). It can be seen growing high on cliff ledges and in rock crevices. The large available variety of succulents are found amongst the groundcovers or 'vygies'. These plants come in many colours - red, orange, yellow, pink and purple. The most commonly grown species are Delosperma cooperi, D. dyenburgesii, Aptenia cordifolia and the many Lampranthus species. All of the plants listed above must be grown in full sun and in well-drained soil. However, there are a few succulents that will only thrive in a shady position, such as Crassula multicava, C. spathulata and C. pellucida. These spreading groundcovers have dainty white flowers and are suitable for dry, shaded areas.

Most importantly, almost all of the plants mentioned in this article will attract either birds or butterflies. For those of you gentle readers that are not convinced or who think that succulents are unattractive, may I suggest that you visit the Karoo Botanical Gardens, the town of Vanrhynsdorp or the aloe garden at Kirstenbosch. You will definitely be inspired.