

by Johann Kikillus @ The Garden Centre, Kirstenbosch

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 afro* (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 juttiae* (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.

The smaller succulents can be divided into two groups: low growing 'shrubs' and spreading groundcovers. The more attractive low growing plants are *Aloe brevifolia* (rosette aloe), *A. spicata*, *A. striata*, *A. branddraaiensis*, *A. succotrina*, *Crassula coccinea* (red crassula), *Cotyledon orbiculata* (pigs' ears), *Portulacaria prostrata*, *Haworthia*, *Gasteria* and *Bulbine frutescens*. Pig's ears have round grey or green leaves

with orange tubular flowers growing from an upright stalk. The sap from the leaves is said to cure warts. *Bulbine frutescens* is one of the most popular garden and medicinal plants. The sap from the narrow leaves is used for a variety of skin problems especially for acne and sunburn. It has attractive orange or yellow inflorescences that flower almost all year round. The red crassula flowers in late summer in the Cape Peninsula mountains, its brilliant red flowers pollinated by the



Be inspired by the spectacular colours of the vygies in the Mathews' Rockery at Kirstenbosch.

Mountain Pride butterfly (*Meneris tulbaghia*). It can be seen growing high up on cliff ledges and in rock crevices.

The largest 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. lydenburgense*, *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 *Crossula 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 that 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 in June or early spring. You will definitely be inspired.®