

Aloe

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Linnaeus described the genus Aloe in 1753. Aloes had been known, though, for millennia--dried sap of some aloes was an important commodity of antiquity used as a purgative and to treat open wounds. The slimy juice of many has been used to sooth burns and abrasions. Searching the Internet for "aloe history," however, yields sales-oriented Web pages of silliness and fiction.

We grow them for their beauty. Leaves are often toothed, spotted, marbled or all three, in shades of green, bronze, red, brown, and white. Some are diminutive, resembling grass, others trees, but most medium to large, ground-hugging rosettes. All have tubular flowers borne in spikes with mostly yellow to red flowers, pollinated by sunbirds, which in Africa fill the ecological niche occupied here by hummingbirds. Most are quite easy and rewarding to grow. Aloe vera has been grown worldwide for centuries and is often someone's first succulent. It is one of the easiest to grow under widely varying conditions.

Aloes are exclusively Old World plants. Most are found in Africa, with many also in Madagascar and the Arabian Peninsula. Humans, as were Agave here in North America, no doubt disseminated some of these species.

The great majority of Aloe comes from summer-rainfall regions. Few, though, experience summer temperatures as hot as ours. These summer growers rest during the hottest part of our year and grow actively in the spring and early fall. In habitat, many of these plants occupy niches more moist than their surroundings: crevices in rocks, flats near streams, and areas with substantial fogs or night dews.

Aloes from western Africa experience a so-called Mediterranean, winter-rainfall climate. They grow when rains come, and are mostly dormant during the hot, rainless summer. During the summer droughts, they usually receive water as dew, so they seldom must tolerate long spells of complete drought. Some of these winter growers are: *Aloe arenicola*, that grows on the beach; the beautiful tree *A. dichotoma*, which may get summer rain as well; *A. falcata*, *A. framesii*, *A. gariensis*, *A. melanacantha*, *A. pearsonii*, *A. pillansii*, *A. ramosissima*, another spectacular tree, and *A. variegata*, the partridge breast Aloe. In habitat, these plants look severely stressed during the summers: leaves sunburned red and curled up, tips brown, resembling not at all the plants we enter in shows.

In our climate, most prefer at least light shade or, morning sun with full afternoon shade. Overhead tree canopies will provide both shade and some frost protection; only a few are fully frost hardy in the open in our winters, though *A. polyphylla* is a high-altitude alpine plant experiencing snow cover every year. Its seeds must be frozen in ice before sprouting. Those who have tried to grow it in Phoenix suggest treating it as a winter annual.