

Growing Lithops in Phoenix

Doug Dawson

July 2004

Eight years ago, like many other plant people, I was hesitant to purchase any *Lithops* since I had killed my share in the past. I decided to try again and this time from seed. I succeeded with *L. schwantesii*, which seems to like our climate. Since then, I have grown nearly 250 species, subspecies, varieties and cultivars with a great deal of success. Phoenix is a much better place to grow them than many places in the world. However, some cautions are in order to prevent meltdowns, sunburn and other problems.

Tips To Help Lithops Survive Phoenix

1. *Lithops* like light, but one should not transfer them to full sun without giving them an adjustment period. In the hot Phoenix summer, most lithops cannot survive full sun. I keep mine in at least 40% shade due to my greenhouse conditions.
2. In the summer while they are dormant, they definitely do not want a full watering. I water most of mine once or twice a week in the evening but very scantily—only enough for the water to soak down about ¼” deep. If you have a spray bottle, just 2 or 3 squirts for a four inch pot is enough. During humid or cloudy August monsoon days, refrain from watering when in doubt. *L. ruschiorum* is the most sensitive to over watering. *L. lesliei* needs the most water.
3. During the fall before they bloom it is good to give them a thorough watering all the way down to their toes. Of course, the soil must have excellent drainage, like almost all succulents. While blooming and when re-absorbing last year’s leaf pair, watering should be less. Once the old leaf pair is nearly absorbed, a good drink is in order as long as really hot weather has not hit. Note: It is important for the plant to re-absorb the old leaf pair. Some species are more stubborn than others on this point and, therefore, need water to be withheld to a degree for this to occur.
4. If *Lithops* are left out where birds can get at them, eventually the birds will peck them to death.
5. Fertilizer seems to be unnecessary. A very weak fertilizing once in the spring and once in the fall probably would not hurt.
6. *Lithops* grow fine in a great variety of soil recipes. My mix usually has 1 part organic mix from the nursery, 2 parts sand, 1 part pumice, and 1 part plain old desert dirt from my yard. Do not use a loamy mix as you would for tropical house plants.
7. Be careful about taking cultivation advice from books whose main audience consists of gardeners in England. Everything is different there.

8. *Lithops* like some air movement. In your greenhouse or window, try to have a fan going nearby.
9. *Lithops optica* and especially *L. optica rubra* seem to be very sensitive to our high summer temperatures. I have developed the habit of bringing them in for the summer, watering them very little if any. They sit on a north windowsill by the kitchen sink. They go back out to the greenhouse about October 1.
10. I keep most of my *Lithops* in plastic pots like most of my other succulents. More frequent watering is needed in clay pots. Soil depth should be at least three inches deep due to our extreme heat. Most of mine have at least four inches of soil depth.
11. Pests: Birds are the worst. Sometimes crickets may take a bite, and, of course, keep mice a way. Mealy bugs don't seem to bother my *Lithops*, but I sometimes need to be on the lookout for red spider mites.
12. Can *Lithops* be successfully grown in the house? I have given many to a friend in Portland, Oregon. She grows them well on her kitchen counter with morning sun. Of course, they grow a bit taller than normal and don't bloom, but they still look nice.
13. Can they take frost? Probably, especially if they are dry. I have never yet lost one to frost.
14. Transplanting: They can usually be easily transplanted, and do not need their roots left out to dry like many cacti. Just do not water them much for the first week after transplanting.
15. They love rocky top dressing. In nature, many grow in quartz fields or in shallow crevasses of stony outcroppings.
16. If you buy them from a store here like Home Depot, etc., they were probably grown in California. It is usually best to repot them since the cardboard-like soil they come in is inappropriate for our conditions.
17. Do not fold, bend, spindle or mutilate them.