

Providing Shade for Cactus & Succulents...

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Sometimes it is helpful in landscaping to compare the elements of our gardens to an interior space, with the vines and taller shrubs serving as the walls, the flowers and groundcovers as a living carpet, the accent plants our artwork, and the tree canopies as our ceilings. Well, last summer a major portion of our garden ceiling collapsed when one of the 40-foot wide South American mesquite trees in our backyard blew over during a monsoon storm. This heart-breaking event left our shade-grown perennials and succulents silently screaming for protection. Fortunately, our shed was fairly well stocked with black shade cloth from an earlier incident involving the loss of a major limb from said tree, and I immediately applied it to protect my succulents from sunburn, which can quickly occur in just one afternoon on a scorching July day. In a pinch, you can even use the white frost cloth sold in nurseries; it will give your plants approximately 70% shade. Some folks invest in shade umbrellas like those sold for pool decks to protect sun-sensitive plants from the hot afternoon sun.

Last fall I transplanted those plants that can't take full sun to more sheltered areas. This summer I will need to continue to use shade cloth to acclimate the plants that can eventually take full sun. Unfortunately much of the shade cloth sold at garden centers provides 70% shade or more, which is way too much for many desert plants and they may never acclimate to full sun with this much cover. You can find shade cloth of varying densities by shopping around online or locally from G&M Agricultural Supply in Payson (1-800-901-0096) or Arizona Bag Company (602-272-1333, 2530 W. Buckeye Rd., Phoenix). I've had good luck starting with 50% shade cloth and eventually reducing it to 30% shade cloth after a few months (or an entire summer), and eventually removing it altogether, provided that the succulent plants do not begin to turn yellow. A yellowing cactus or succulent can be restored to its healthy green color, but once it turns white or brown, it is permanently scarred. Purple or red is a natural response of many cacti, aloes, agaves and some other succulents to strong sun or other stressors and is usually not a concern. Another option is to use multiple layers of 20 or 30% shade cloth to either increase or decrease the amount of shade desired.

If you just can't stand the look of shade cloth clouding your plants like a shroud all summer, try cutting a few boughs from a mesquite tree (if you still have one standing!) and draping them over the plant needing protection. As the leaves dry, shrink and eventually drop off, the plant will gradually get more and more sun. If it looks okay, remove the branch. If it begins to yellow again, add some fresh branches.

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