

Good Growing

Debra Korobkin

July 1999

For folks just starting in cactus and succulent (C&S) horticulture, here's a primer. For the "mature" grower, sometimes it's a good thing to review the basics.

Water: Unlike regular houseplants, potted C&Ss require a cyclical watering schedule. The cycles are based on the seasons. I use this formula:

- October-February water once a month
- March-September water twice a month.

When watering, be thorough and give the plant a good drink. Let excess water drain out the pot's drainage hole.

Most outdoor potted C&Ss can handle at least dappled Arizona sunshine. Many can use a lot more. Very few thrive indoors in dark places.

Etiolation is a condition that occurs in plants that receive too little light over a long time. Spindly, limp, yellow-green growth is characteristic. The opposite condition is *sunburn*. It occurs from overexposure to radiant light in a short time. Sunburn looks like papery, yellow or tan burn spots on the skin of the plant facing the sun.

Acclimate plants to a new home by gradually moving them to sunnier spots until an optimum level is reached. This process can be an adventure as some plants thrive in six plus hours/day of full sun, and others need just a little morning light.

Most growers have their own recipes for creating a C&S soil mix. Some commonalities are:

- Quick draining
- Little or no peat
- More than just sand

For a generic C&S soil recipe, try one part builder's sand, one part pumice (or perlite or gravel), and one part commercial potting soil.

Talk to others who grow the same kind of plants as you. Some interesting secret ingredients will appear. As for me, I add a little garden lime in soils intended for Sonoran and Chihuahuan cactus to promote robust spination.

Cacti, in particular, tend to do well with a low nitrogen, high phosphorus and potassium brew. When looking for a fertilizer, examine the N-P-K ratio (that's Nitrogen-Phosphorus-Potassium). Look for lower N and higher P and K, like 3-6-6 or 5-10-10.

This means no manure! Manure is too rich in nitrogen. Rather, try generic tomato food at regular strength a couple of times during the warm weather. However, if in doubt, don't feed.

The number one thing to remember is to be sure the pot has a drainage hole! Excess water needs to drain away from the plant's roots to avoid deadly rot.

Next, place a plant in a pot that's neither too big nor too small for comfortable growth. A little plant in a big pot looks overly optimistic, whereas a big plant in a small pot feels like wearing too small a shoe.

Now the secrets of successful C&S culture are not so secret. Pass 'em along.