

Asclepiads in Arizona: Hoodia

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While living in St Louis, Missouri, reading decades-old issues of the *Cactus and Succulent Journal* of the Cactus and Succulent Society of America, I first came across descriptions of these fabulous milkweeds. Every article exuded the raw odor of fear when describing their culture and longevity in captivity.

St Louis has a warm, very humid and rainy summer, and an icy, snowy winter. People there without greenhouses put plants outside when it's warm and take them into the basement for the winter. Basements are somewhat cool and damp.

Hoodia supposedly rot quickly when moist for too long, and are believed to need warmth in the winter. My first plant, *H. bainii*, went into a 10cm / 4-inch clay pot with a soil mix of half gravel and half small rocks, the better to drain. Summer watering was only when the soil had been bone dry for a week or so. In the winter, it went into the basement under fluorescent lights and received no water.

It grew not at all during the entirety of two summers and two winters. "At least it's not dead," I thought.

Toward the end of our second winter together, we moved to Phoenix. Clay pots dry out very fast here in the summer heat, and it was due for repotting in late spring.

I read some more and saw the photos of plants growing in hardpan soil without shelter from the sun. I read about African climate patterns and learned about the summer rains. The photos looked remarkably like the deserts of southwestern North America, and it seemed reasonable to treat hoodia like the plants here in Arizona, where we have a similar climate. After rains, soil here is usually damp close to the surface for about a week. "Maybe hoodia can use more water than I've been giving them," I thought. I guessed they grew during the warm season, as do almost all ascleps.

After frost danger had passed, I moved my hoodia to full sun. When spring came, the plant, with three stems no more than 10cm / 4 inches tall, went into a 20cm / 8-inch pot. I used a soil mix of half commercial potting soil and half fine local decomposed granite (the soil at my house). When the weather warmed up a bit more (nights over 20C / 68 F) I soaked the plant and held my breath.

Well, not for too long... within two days the tips of the stems showed bright green in the cracks between the tubercles and the plant started growing. I had not seen this before in the almost three years I'd owned the plant. Not wanting to push my luck, I let it dry out to avoid rot. When it dried out the bright green went away and the plant stopped growing.

Over the next few weeks, as the temperatures rose to our normal summer heat, I shortened the watering intervals until the plant was never near dryness. It grew and grew

and grew, without sign of rot. I started fertilizing and it grew faster. Being in the full sun it stayed nice and tight. By the end of the season, it had over a dozen stems.

By now, I'd read of the winters in hoodia homeland: sunny, cool, dry air, little to no rain, occasional frost at night. This sounds like Arizona, so I left the plant outside, dry, under an eave to avoid rain and frost. I knew from St Louis experience it would easily survive a dry winter. It did; the next spring, with a good soaking, it resumed its growth. A month later, it bloomed, with tan stars hiding the top 3/4 of the plant. It grew even better that year, and in midsummer, I put it into a 25cm / 10-inch glazed ceramic pot. It looked somewhat over potted but grew so much it soon looked under potted. Best growth is during spring and fall, but it grows all summer.

Two other species I bought didn't get as much water as I would have liked due to lack of time. They grew a little but each time they dried out, they stopped growing.

I haven't had problems with mealy bugs on my hoodia since they stay outdoors all year. I now incorporate imidacloprid into the soil of all my ascleps. I use Bayer Grub Granules, which I can buy at my local Ace Hardware. Home Depot has made a decision not to carry imidacloprid.

I took some cuttings to learn how. I didn't keep them continually moist and they didn't root. I kept them wet and they rooted.

My original plant just collapsed one summer. When I unpotted it, I found the old potting soil had decomposed to black mush. So, I no longer use any organic matter in my soils. I just use screened wash granite.

I think the important factors to remember about hoodia culture are:

- At all times, give as much light as possible. Direct sun all day even with 50C / 122 F temperatures will not harm these plants if they've been moved to full exposure gradually.
- Keep cool and completely dry during the winter. The less winter humidity the better.
- When nights warm up, start watering. During warm weather, while growing, don't allow to dry completely, but don't grow as bog plants. This will require attention to soil mixture, type of pot used, and the weather. Few asclepiads will rot while actively growing unless infested with mealy bugs or standing in a dish of water.
- During the summer, place the plant where it will get as much heat as possible. If nights are cool, placing against a south wall or on a concrete patio may help provide extra heat.
- Summer relative humidity below 60% does not seem to present problems. Humidity above this may require measures to provide more heat and faster drying soil.

- Go ahead and fertilize while growing. A heavy hand with the scoop is fine.
- Plan for mealy bugs.
- Avoid organic matter in the soil mix. If you must use it, repot every 2-3 years or your soil will rot.
- Don't bring them into the house while blooming.