

SMITTEN WITH SANSEVIERIA

Sue Hakala

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Sansevierias are those hardy plants you see growing in the dark areas of bars or, in the inner courtyard of a mall where the sun never shines. Sometimes their pots become ashtrays, the soil allowed to get hard as a rock. They have underwhelmed most gardeners. Many call them mother-in-law tongues; perhaps that's why no one wants them around. *Sansevierias* are, in fact, amazingly tough and beautiful plants.

To correct a misconception about *Sansevieria*, let's start with the pronunciation: Say: san sev ee air ee a. Sanses, as their admirers know them, are a member of the Agave family, and mostly come from Africa with a few originating in India and Asia.

WHY GROW THEM? You can touch them, stroke them, admire them up close or from a distance without having to give them enormous amounts of time and energy. They will look green and lush even in the worst part of the year. Their white bloom consists of small flowers that open in succession on a short spike, throughout the spring, summer and fall (depending on the species), sweetly scenting the night. Sanses generally look cheery and healthy all the time. They come in various sizes, shapes, textures, and a variety of colors. Some can grow in almost any location if protected from frost, even a western exposure where I live in Mesa. Perhaps most importantly, they will make you feel like you are the world's most fabulous gardener as they grow no matter what.

Another reason to grow Sanses is the insects they attract: none. Yes, that's right, none. I've been growing over 30 different genera, some for over 33 years. I have never seen an insect even walk across a leaf in my plant house or in the landscape. There are no insect problems: nothing to discuss, nothing to spray, and nothing to pick off. Personally, I find this one of their finest qualities—they are always healthy! Then I live in a dry environment. Scale, thrips and mealy bugs may be present in Sanses in more humid areas of the country.

HOW TO GROW *Sansevierias*, like all succulents, like a quick draining soil. I use a cactus mix (no bark or sticks), and about ½ pumice, with a little slow release fertilizer thrown in. I find the larger the pot, the larger they will grow—no mystery here. They will grow until they fill the pot. Then, they will split the pot. It doesn't matter what kind of pot: metal, clay, plastic, stone. Then they want out, the relentless pressure that their tubers put out can crack through anything. It is best to replant them once a year, if for no other reason than to save your pots. They will love it, and will grow and grow and grow.

Sansevierias are succulent plants and must have their soil dry out between waterings or they can rot. Use a water meter to be sure the soil has dried out before you water. If you don't have a water meter, stick your finger deep in the pot. If it feels at all damp, don't water. The ones in pots get watered once a week in the summer, and maybe once a month in the winter. In colder parts of the country, it would be best to keep them dry through the winter with a light mid-winter watering. The only exceptions I've found are

the yellow or variegated Sanses. They don't like getting cold (generally below 50F), and they don't like direct sun. It seems that the plant tissues are more delicate and can't take the extremes.

All plants are fertilized with rose food three times a year: late February, early April, and early October. Plants in the Sonoran Desert where I live generally have a growth spurt in February-May, and October. In other parts of the country, fertilize when the nights warm up and they are actively growing, and don't fertilizer when the plants are resting in the cooler months. You can fertilize more. They'll like it. Soon, though, you will have more Sanses than you know what to do with.

PROPAGATING It's so easy to divide Sanses. After getting the plant out of the pot (which is no small feat at times), use a large, sharp, sterilized (with alcohol) knife to cut apart the large tubers leaving some roots. Place the plants in the shade for 2-3 days while the cut dries up and calluses over. This is to seal the wound so that no bad stuff can enter the plant like bacteria. Be sure to sterilize the knife before moving on to a new plant. Or, cut a leaf off a plant, dust it with rooting hormone which contains fungicide, then just stick it in the soil after callusing over. Water when the soil dries out, and, guess what, you'll have a new plant. Leaf cuttings do not work with variegated plants.

WHAT KIND SHOULD YOU GROW? *Sansevierias* have basically two kinds of leaves: soft = tropical home environment, hard = desert-like home environment. Let that be your guide in purchasing and deciding where to place them. Remember the right plant in the right place makes everyone happy. Generally, I've found that the soft/tropical ones like a bit more shade so I place them on the north side of my plant house. The hard/desert ones can go on the south side of the plant house. Yes, even in Phoenix. In fact, I grow some on the west side of my patio in the ground where they get the blazing afternoon sun, and reflection off of concrete. They love their spot, spread and bloom nicely. Although when over 110 they get 40% shade cloth, but just for that day. They really don't like those dark bars and malls they get placed in or, that dark corner in your home.

In sunny locations try: *Sansevieria singularis* which is dark green, hard like a tusk with tiny flowers; *S. kirkii* v. *pulchra* which has oval, slightly cupped, dark green leaves, *S. cylindrical* which can be 30-60 inches tall with a stiff erect fan shape.

For hanging baskets *S. parva* and *S. socotra* are handsome. Nice variegated one are: *S. hahnii* with buttery yellow leaves and green stripes (watch the watering) ; speckled *S. guineensis*; snakeskin patterned *S. trifasciata*. Silver-colored ones include "moonshine," a beauty with broad, but short leaves; and *S. trifasciata laurentii*.

If I had to choose one as my all time favorite, I'd probably choose "Lillian True." The leaves are positively sensuous. They look like creamy mustard with beautiful lime to dark green stripes, tall and graceful. Always perky, but a bit bashful about the sun. Many people, who aren't yet stricken with a love of *Sansevierias*, covet this plant when they see it.

WHERE TO BUY *SANSEVIERIAS* Every nursery, grocery and discount store always have a few, sometimes quite unusual and exotic ones can be found with the more typical. I always check these rather mundane locations, as I never know what I might find. Even at major plant sales there are few Sansas available. Sometimes you may find a new introduction not even named yet as I did at a Huntington Botanical Garden plant sale. Grisby Cactus Gardens in Vista, California and B & B Cactus Farms in Tucson have been good sources. Individual growers are always looking for good homes for pups and offshoots, just ask.

Check out the International Sansevieria Society.com. They publish a journal with big pictures of the plants. Look up Growing Tropical Plants in Phoenix.com a great web site with excellent growing tips. *The Splendid Sansevieria* by Juan Chahinan has lots of descriptions, pictures and helpful information.

There's not much written about *Sansevierias*. Most books begrudgingly give a paragraph to the entire genus. Don't let that detract you. These beautiful plants don't need an authority to tell you how to grow them. Just get one, they'll do the rest themselves, all the while looking alluring and captivating. Before you know it, you, too, will be smitten with *Sansevierias*.