

WATERING CACTUS AND SUCCULENTS DURING THE SUMMER – PROCEED WITH CAUTION by Tom Gatz

(modified and reprinted from The Gatherings, the newsletter for the volunteers at the Desert Botanical Garden)

Believe it or not, some cacti and succulents can and will readily collapse and die if you water them during the heat of the summer, especially when the nights stay hot. For example, if you were seduced into purchasing any of the following attractive rosette succulents in the family Crassulaceae often sold at the big box stores this past winter, read on if you want to see them alive this time next year.

On our club's website, Dr. Leo Martin advises us to bring Aeonium, Crassula, Dudleya, Echeveria, and Sedum rosettes into the house when it really starts to heat up, with no watering all summer, except for an occasional light spray. Dudleyas can be kept completely dry. Bring them back outside and resume watering when night temperatures dip into the low 70's, probably in late September or early October. I don't water my aeoniums all summer and keep them in-doors near a bright but shaded window where the leaves gradually wither and fall off until just the growing tips remain. It is painful to watch, but they quickly rejuvenate with that first October watering.

Surprisingly, according to Leo, only a few cacti grow strongly during our long, hot summers. These include Coryphantha, Gymnocalycium, Matucana, Opuntia, Tubinocarpus, and columnar cacti, including saguaros. Leo recommends watering these cacti regularly all summer, trying not to let them dry completely for very long. He adds, however, that most other cacti, especially the small ones, stop growing when nights stay above 90 degrees, and are at risk of rot if watered at this time. When summer nights are cooler, they can be watered but still need to dry out between watering. Most do not like baking in the heat for any length of time either, so some shade is helpful at this time of year.

Tucson nurseryman Gene Joseph says that during the cool season most aloes can be watered every two weeks (or even weekly if under good light) for optimum growth and appearance. In the hot summer, he recommends the same schedule, but cautions us to reduce the amount of water we apply. He says that this will keep the roots from drying out too badly without causing rot to occur, which starts in the roots. Aloe enthusiast Jordan Mantz advises that large aloe specimens can get by with water only once a month in the summer. Aloe species (or former species) that some Arizona growers have found to be especially sensitive to too much summer water included Aloe arenicola, A. broomii, A. cooperi, A. comosa, A. comptonii, A. dhufarensis, A. dicotoma, A. distans, A. erinaceae, A. glauca, A. hardyi, A. krapohlina, A. melanacantha, A. meyeri, A. pearsonii, A. pillansii, A. plicatilis, A. pratensis, A. reynoldsii and A. variegata. Many of these are from winter rainfall areas in South Africa and should be watered lightly and infrequently during our summers.

During the summer, most agaves in pots appreciate being watered three or four times each month and those in the ground about twice a month if it doesn't rain. However, according to Tucson agave expert Greg Starr, a few agave species don't appreciate very much supplemental water once established, such as *Agave cerulata*, *A. deserti* and *A. utahensis*, and may rot if given extra water.

In contrast, some folks mistakenly think that adeniums are low-water plants. In fact, while they need to be kept dry and dormant in a frost-free winter location, once they leaf out, they really thrive and flower better with lots of summer water, low-nitrogen fertilizer and a good half-day of sunshine. Many euphorbias also love our heat, provided they do not burn in the sun, and most appreciate regular summer watering when they are almost dry. And if you took home one of Maurie Clapp's Arizona Queen of the Night (*Peniocereus greggii*) seedlings that were brought in by Doug Dawson at the March meeting, they grow quickly with lots of summer water and fertilizer.

Thanks to Cathy Babcock, Rosa Crespo, Angelica Elliot, Brandi Eide, Gene Joseph, Jordan Mantz, Leo Martin and Scott McMahon for commenting on earlier drafts of this article.

Photo caption: When it gets hot, Aeoniums should be brought inside, not watered, and allowed to go dormant to survive our Arizona summers.
Photo by the author.