

DESIGNING A GARDEN WITH ALOES & SUCCULENTS

By: Greg Dowsett, 11 July 2018

I am asked all the time by clients to design zero maintenance gardens and my response has always been that that is not possible – much to the dismay on many of their faces. This request also seems to come on the back of a request for lots of colour, to which I sink my shaking head even lower. Traditionally colour in a garden equates to flowers and that in turn usually equates to a lot of work.

Help is at hand though in the form of succulents – or in Afrikaans Vetplante (I just love that description as it is so appropriate in its translation to “ fatplants”) named so because of how they store water in their leaves making their leaves appear “fat”. And therein lies one of their secrets to success. Like camels storing a food source in their humps to carry them through long dry periods, so too do succulents store a food source in their leaves.

Gardening trends in South Africa have been leaning toward this style of gardening for a while now and it’s not surprising why. Top of the list of appealing characteristics is their ability to store food and water allowing them to tolerate drought. Secondly succulent plants are available in a range of foliage and flower colours, forms and textures, which also allows them to combine well with other leafy plants, grasses and perennials in your garden or in a natural environment. Thirdly, most well chosen succulent plants require only occasional maintenance.

Just to note at this point – I talk very generically about succulents. There are many different families, genera and species from many different countries around the world, therefor its important to consider, like with any form of gardening, the growing conditions in your garden and which plants are going to do well and which will not.

DESIGN AND LAYOUTS:

When designing a garden using succulent or Aloes, the same garden design principles apply as when designing any garden. Most important is to consider how big the plant are going to grow in, what I call, their useful lifespan – This is not necessarily the plant size at maturity, but at a point when the garden looks its optimum in its time. Now I know this sounds a bit wishy washy rather than technical but once you've got a feel for it, you will understand and I'm sure many of you are gardeners already so probably do understand this.

Once this is established textures, colours and forms need to be considered and arranged together to compliment each other. As there are so many variations of this plant type, one does have to be careful not to overdo it as the garden could look too busy. Sometimes less is more.

The only other bit of advice in this area is to be creative and arrange things as you think they will look good. The major advantage in working with succulent plants is that most

are incredibly easy to propagate and relocate enabling you to change any mistakes even when the garden has matured.

SOIL PREPARATION:

When one looks at the origin of most succulents and Aloes, we can get some clues into what type of conditions they would in which they will thrive. Most plants that are readily or commercially available tend to cope with most soil types but would prefer soils that are well drained. Some loamy soils or (for example potting soil), is well drained but the drainage come in the form of organic material such as bark which on its own is not ideal. Most succulents and Aloes naturally enjoy a sandy soil. This aids with drainage but also assists with stability required in the roots which is needed, in most cases, to hold up a heavy head of leaves due to the high water content inside the bulk of these plants.

I find that when preparing a garden bed in clay soils for succulent planting, a good mix of an organic material like compost and sand works well. If potting your succulents, I do use potting soil but add in some silica sand. This is basically swimming pool filter sand. It has great evenly sized grains and which add great friability, drainage and good support.

PLANT & PLANTING PREPARATION

One of the beauty's of succulent gardening is that if you have some in your garden already, or if you have friends who have them, most grow from just a leaf or a broken off stem or a cutting from a branch. Without much special care, usually these can effectively be pushed into or placed on the soil and magically roots will grow and the plant will flourish.

There are however one or two pointers you should note when planting using this method.

Ideally when taking cuttings from existing plants, due to their high water content, the exposed cut will be very wet. And similarly to an open wound, infection can get in until it scabs over. Hence one should leave these cuttings out for a while - a day or two to allow the wound to dry out and start to form a little callous tissue which has the same effect as a scab on a skin wound. After this they can be planted with much less risk of infection. Another important note with planting using this method is to not add fertilizer to you soil. This may seem counterintuitive but these plants do not have roots yet and therefore cannot use the food that the fertilizer augments the soil with. A nutrient rich environment will encourage both bacterial and fungal growth which will be detrimental to these new plant cuttings.

It is important to differentiate however, if you are planting rooted plants that already have an established roots ball (l.e: out of a planting bag or pot) that it is in your best

interest to mix a good quality high phosphate fertilizer into the soil before hand. This can be a natural fertilizer such as bonemeal, an organic fertilizer such as Bio rock or a chemical fertilizer such as superphosphate.

So what then if you are relocating a plant with its roots from another position; The same fertilizer rule applies as per unrooted cuttings. The relocated plant will go into a state of stress and will shut down the uptake of nutrient and water until it settles into its new position and can reconnect itself with its feeder roots.

Similarly it is also important not to over water both cutting plants and relocated plants as the same principle will apply as with the uptake of food. The result will be a very wet soil around the roots or base zone of the plants and rotting will become inevitable.

PLANT COMBINATIONS

There are thousands of ways that one can combine plants together depending on what effect you are trying to create. Formal and contemporary designs call for more impactful forms using less plants compared to a more traditional rockery type of planting or recreating a natural look.

Gardening with succulents and Aloes offer such an amazing array of different forms, colours and textures. Here are just a small selection of complimentary plants to demonstrate this point – noting that some of these combinations include plants that are not succulents but work well together.

Portulacaria afra & Euphorbia tirucalli

Sedum nussbaumianum & Ruschia linoleata

Echeveria spp & Creeping Portulacaria

Aloe ferox/ marlothii & Ngongoni grass

Aloe ferox & Crassula multicaeva.

Aloe barbarae & Dwarf Agapanthus.

PLANT CARE

Now that you have planted your succulent garden, you will want to make sure that it stays looking in top form. Please do not be fooled by the dangling carrot that this is a no maintenance garden. It may be drought tolerant but this word expressly means it tolerates little water. To keep the plants looking at their peak, they will require a certain amount of watering and more importantly feeding – just to remember however what I spoke about earlier regarding feeding at planting time.

Once established however, a liquid organic fertilizer (for example Seagro) will top the list for regular/ monthly feeding. I would also apply a high power feed such as 5:1:5 in spring to give the plants a boost for the upcoming summer growing season.

Water requirements are obviously a lot less than required for a bed of roses, but unfortunately the question of how much is very subjective. It depends largely on weather conditions, aspect, soils etc etc, in your particular garden. The best advice I can give here is if the soil has been dry (down to 5cm) for more than a few days then give a good deep watering. On the flip side, too much water can be detrimental. I would avoid watering when conditions are particularly humid or during rainy season as this could result in conditions being too wet around the root zones and possibly rotting on the plant stems.

As far as pest and diseases go, most succulents are fairly resilient. In recent years however, Aloes have become susceptible to bug attacks and resultant viral diseases such as kanker. This is caused by mites when plants are young causing cell damage which manifests as unsightly growths on the base of the leaves or on the flower heads. This problem can only be controlled preventatively using a systemic pesticide to get rid of the mites before any sign of the kanker has been noticed.

Once these growths have formed they should be carefully cut out and destroyed.

Another pest that gives Aloes a lot of grief – particularly plants that receive no supplementary watering – is red spider mite which leaves a fine light coloured mottling on the leaves. This can also be controlled by drenching the root soil with a systemic pesticide such as Koinor.

Do not be put off by this however. The rewards from these plants, particularly at this time of the year (winter) surpass any of the niggles above.

I have only touched the tip of the iceberg with what I have said today. There is a whole world of intrigue out there with succulent gardening that both young and old can experiment and play with – Happy gardening...