

Australian Succulent Plants in Cultivation

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Some experts regard most native succulent plants as unsuitable for cultivation, but an increasing number are being grown successfully. Succulent plants need less water, fertiliser and other chemicals than many commonly cultivated plants. Demand on our diminishing water supplies is also increasing along with the cost, so choosing plants with low water and chemical needs, not to mention other environmental concerns, makes good sense.

Plant lovers still have more than enough water-conserving Australian native plants from which to choose for any veranda, greenhouse or garden, but gardeners will need to seek them out and experiment a little, and isn't that half the fun?

In The Garden

The challenge is to develop creative and uniquely Australian gardens that reflect a lot less of the historic European influences with their high water demand. Succulent plants can play a small but important role here. Historically, while succulents from other parts of the world have become commonplace in gardens, until recently little attempt has been made to introduce native succulent plants into garden design.

Creative use of at least some native succulent plants can achieve a very appealing low-maintenance garden. Gardens which suit most succulent plants include those with seasonally dry areas; stony, sandy or nutrient-deficient soils; windy or coastal areas; salty soils; and areas where only bore water is available.

In The Field and Farm

For larger gardens and open spaces, a range of succulent plants can play an important role. The genera *Carpobrotus*, *Tetragonia*, *Sesuvium*, *Trianthema* and *Disphyma* are well recognised and used effectively for erosion control in and around sandy or saline soils.

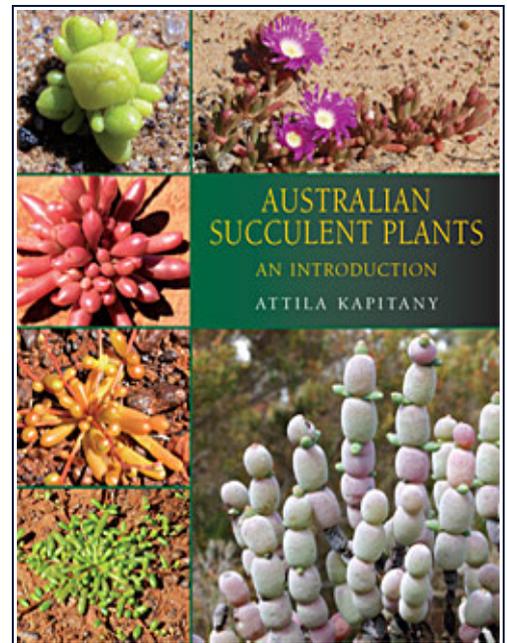
Once established most of these plants can withstand a certain level of dryness (often well beyond that of most other garden plants). Halophytic chenopods, in particular *Halsosarcia*, *Sarcocornia* and *Tecticornia* have the potential to be used for reclaiming salt-degraded farm land. They have adapted to tolerate many environmental extremes, besides salinity, notably aridity, and yet very little is known about most of the Australian species.

Various species of *Maireana* are highly regarded for use in saline-damaged soils. They quickly colonize cultivated or disturbed soils in their range and are therefore also worthwhile plants for soil stabilisation in rehabilitation work. Some *Maireana* are known to have fire-retardant properties, probably due to the very succulent leaves that do not burn readily. Most species are also very drought-tolerant and provide both food and water to a range of animals during these dry periods.

The bottle tree *Brachychiton rupestris* is possibly Australia's most valuable tree. In recent years some farmers have been planting this species in fields to sell to the nursery and landscaping trade, where demand is sky-rocketing. Advanced plants, or any with a trunk exceeding 20 cm in diameter, are considered a prize in any landscape or courtyard, increasing in value and making a great investment. Trees at any size can be moved and larger mature ones are regularly sold for \$10,000-\$20,000.

Australian Succulent Plants: An Introduction

This stunning book is well set out, extremely colourful and inspirational. The captions on the photographs are informative and clear. The production of this book is a first for this contemporary group of native plants.



Pot Culture

Numerous Australian succulent plants are suitable for pot culture. A few can even be grown indoors, e.g. species of *Peperomia*, *Hoya* and *Doryanthes*. Beyond the plants mentioned here, there are many others that have not yet been trialled in pots.

Species of *Adansonia*, *Brachychiton*, *Bombax*, *Myrmecodia*, *Hydnophytum*, *Stephania* and *Cissus* have a natural tendency to develop stout stems or tubers. This feature, coupled with their general ability to remain short, makes them ideal to bonsai.

The genera *Adansonia*, *Brachychiton* and *Bombax* grow back well even after drastic pruning, another good feature for bonsai or other pot culture.

Little is known about *Cissus* and *Stephania* species and their use in ornamental horticulture in Australia, especially for bonsai, however internationally there is considerable demand for them for this purpose.

Species of *Hydnophytum*, *Myrmecodia* and *Dischidia major*, can make great conversation pieces in any pot plant collection, especially if some resident ants can also be accommodated.

For hanging baskets there are *Hoya*, *Dischidia* and *Sarcostemma* species and you could even try *Bulbine vagans*.

Some plants covered in my latest book, Australian Succulent Plants (see side panel) are now uncommon, rare or non-existent in much of their former habitat, so raising them from seed and maintaining them in potted collections is one way to contribute to their conservation, especially if good records of provenance and horticultural history are kept and surplus plant material is distributed to other growers.

For further information (and photographs of Australian native succulent plants, see Attila's article in the [February 2009 update](#) to ANPSA's online magazine *Australian Plants online*).