

## CACTUS AND SUCCULENT SOCIETY OF AMERICA

# Interesting Succulent Facts

- Succulent plants have evolved to develop a storage hoarding cell structure that acts like a sponge to soak up water when it is available. All cacti are succulents, but not all succulents are cacti.
- Succulent plants have developed the ability to store water when it is available, for use during dry periods.
- South Africa is home to more types of commonly grown succulents than anywhere else. In some regions, like the arid west coast, nearly all visible plant life is succulent, including the trees and shrubs. Succulents also grow commonly in the southwestern United States, Mexico, South America, Madagascar and throughout southern and eastern Africa.
- There are about 10,000 different types of succulent plants, about 2000 of which are in the cactus family. The remaining succulents are from about 60 families of plants, including such commonly known groups as the poinsettia or spurge family, the periwinkle family, the milkweed family, the aloe family, the sesame family, the orchid family and even the grass family.
- Cacti originated in South America before that land mass was connected to North America. Today, Mexico is known for its wide variety of cacti that have evolved there.
- Can I get a drink from a cactus? No, cactus tissue is a lot like a cucumber without the seeds. Many containing poisonous, bitter alkaloid chemicals would make you throw up.
- Cactus spines provide shade for the plant, direct water to its roots, serve as a wind break and protect it from hungry and thirsty mouths.
- "Aloe vera," aka *Aloe barbadensis*, has been used for its healing properties since 2200 BC. Rubbed on the skin, it promotes skin cell growth, especially helpful for burn patients.
- An African succulent called Hoodia in the milkweed family is known for its strong appetite suppressant properties. It has long been used by native Africans on extended journeys and may eventually find its way into pharmaceuticals.
- Saguaro (sa-wahr-oh) cactus, *Carnegiea gigantea*, is the tallest cactus species in the United States, but is exceeded in height by the Mexican Cardón, *Pachycereus pringlei*, from Baja California, Mexico.
- Tequila comes from the distilled heart of the blue agave, *Agave tequilana*. Mescal comes from several different agaves gathered from the wild.
- Because they are full of water in a thirsty world, some succulents, like the popular lithops, mimic rocks. Others, like avonias, look like bird droppings.
- Many succulents have interesting pollinating mechanisms, such as the flowers of some stapeliads in the milkweed family that attract pollinating flies by looking and smelling like the flesh and fur of dead animals.
- *Agave sisalana*, native to Mexico, is a source of sisal or hemp, and is grown as an agricultural crop in many tropical countries.
- *Dioscorea elephantipes*, elephant's foot, makes a precursor of cortisone.
- Many succulents, including the popular European Hens-and-Chicks (*Sempervivum*) and some cacti, are winter-hardy, surviving freezing temperatures and snow cover.