Grower's Spotlight:
Capturing beauty, cultivating trends: Debra Lee Baldwin's succulent journey

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When my husband and I settled onto a sun-soaked half-acre in the foothills north of San Diego in 1989, I was eager to have bright, flashy flowers. I planted canna lilies, roses, narcissus, and swaths of *Gazania* sp. (African daisies). Little did I realize that in a few years I'd find flowers less interesting than plants with fleshy leaves, intriguing symmetry, and sculptural shapes.

Our steep property's decomposed granite soil was vulnerable to erosion, so to supplement existing patches of *Drosanthemum floribundum* (rosea iceplant), my dad—a fan of easy-care, low-water plants—brought us a trunkful of *Crassula multicava* (fairy crassula) cuttings. This shade-loving, ground-cover succulent can be invasive along the coast, but inland's summer heat and winter cold keep it in check. About 10 percent of the plants I grew for color still exist, but there's probably 500 percent more *Crassula multicava*, for which I'm grateful (Fig. 2).

Numerous other succulents were to prove as useful and carefree, but I might not have discovered them were it not for a sequence of events that changed my approach to landscaping at home and beyond. What began as a side interest in succulents became integral to my work as a magazine contributor and author.

My motto: "If it's beautiful, shoot it." For decades, I've hunted and collected gardens and plants with my camera. Having thousands of photos organized by date, location, and topic has proved invaluable for illustrating articles, videos, books, web pages, and social media; inspiring watercolors (my hobby); and designing gift and decorative items such as posters, cards and calendars.

Fig. 1 Debra Lee Baldwin. Photo: Pat Roach

Fig. 2 *Crassula multicava*: As bloom stalks elongate, tiny offsets form on sprays of star-shaped flowers. The oval clones weigh down the stalk and root where they land, spreading the colony.

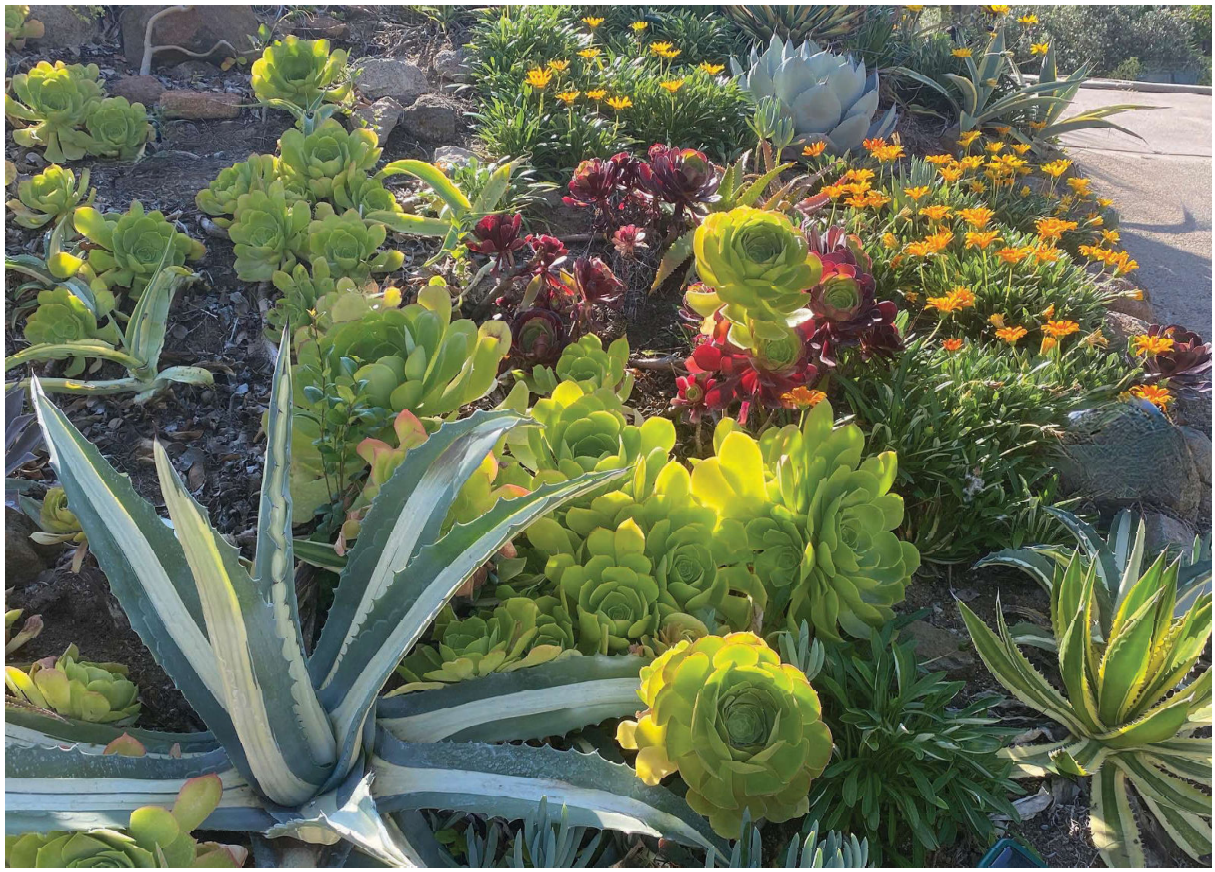


Fig. 3 Observing how light enhances plants is a true pleasure.

As Irwin Lightstone noted in the Winter, 2024 *CSSA Journal*, "Photography means 'writing with light.'" Nothing reveals a plant's beauty like early morning or late-afternoon sun. Even as I write this, I'm enjoying aeoniums outside my office window, haloed golden-green (Fig. 3).

Early on, inspired by experts I interviewed for lifestyle publications, I added ferns, tropicals, hostas, Japanese maples and other ornamentals to my garden. These proved too fussy for a climate with minimal rainfall, low humidity, and searing summer sun. On the other hand, anything South African—especially from the Western Cape—settled right in (Figs. 4 through 7).

During the mid-1990s, as I narrowed my journalistic focus to low-water plants, my own garden became a testing ground. Succulents stood out as easy to establish and maintain even in unamended soil. But I do think it's wise to get them off to a good start. A few miles away is a mushroom farm that gives away compost. I add it to planting holes, mixed with pumice to aid aeration and drainage.

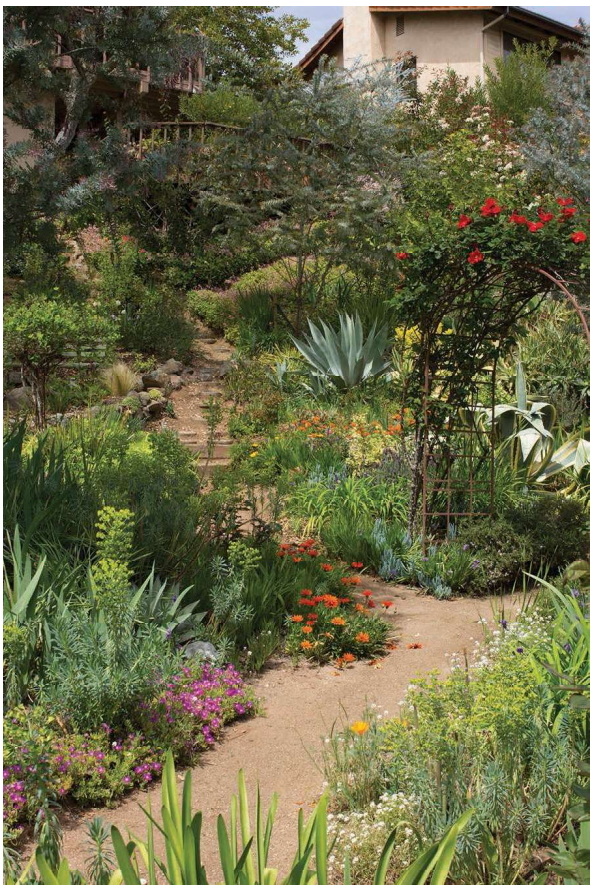


Fig. 4 South African plants blooming in spring include purple-blue *Babiana angustifolia*; magenta *Drosanthemum floribundum*; and orange *Gazania* cultivars. The color gray-blue repeats in acacia trees, *Agave franzosinii*, and *Senecio mandraliscae* at center; and *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii* at lower left.

Fig. 5 *Aloe brevifolia*: This blue aloe from the Western Cape looks good wherever I put it. The specific epithet means "short-leaved."

Fig. 6 *Aloe* x *nobilis*, slightly larger (6+ inches wide) than *Aloe brevifolia*, forms similarly mounded colonies.

Fig. 7 Lovely *Aloe comosa* serves as a focal point in the front garden. Framing it are *Aeonium urbicum* and *Senecio mandraliscae*.

Fig. 8 I'm guilty of valuing aesthetics over practicality. Case in point: Bold, sculptural *Agave americana* 'Marginata' makes this corner of the garden visually dynamic while unfortunately barricading the orange tree.

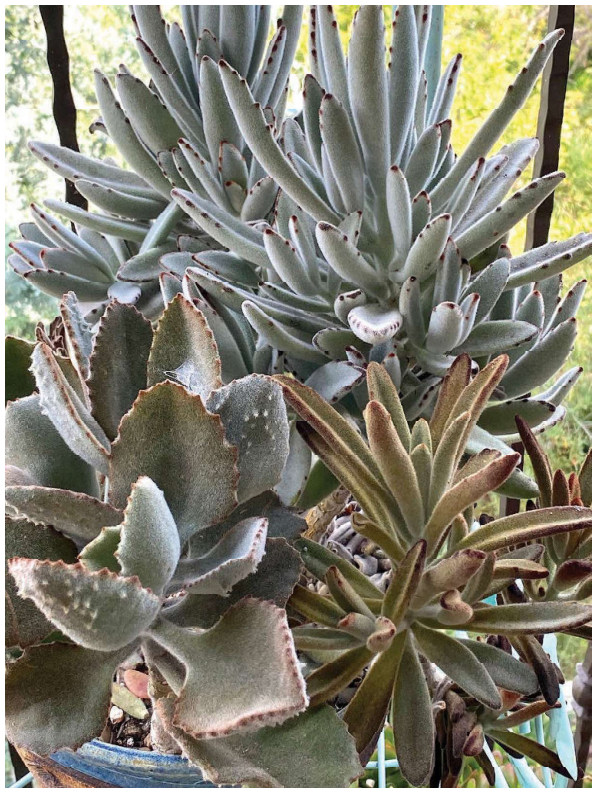


Fig. 9 Tomentose (fuzzy) kalanchoes thrive in the sheltered environment of my deck.

In full sun year-round here in Zone 9b grow agaves, yuccas, dasylirions, *Portulacaria afra*, and cacti (*Opuntia* species and barrels). In addition to the property's native oaks, trees include citrus, acacias and *Cercidium* x 'Desert Museum' (thornless palo verde) (Figs. 8, 12 and 13). Shrub crassulas grow anywhere if protected from frost. There aren't many euphorbias or kalanchoes in the open garden due to their cold sensitivity, but they're among my favorite genera, so I cultivate them in pots (e.g., Figs 9 and 13). In part shade are aeoniums, aloes, mangaves, and sun-sensitive variegates (Figs. 10, 11, and 14).

Cacti and succulent experts I've had the honor to interview for *Sunset* and other publications include the late Merritt ("Sigs") Dunlap of Fallbrook, CA, who bequeathed his collection of columnar cacti (530 plants, 300 taxa) to Lotusland; Jeff Moore of Solana Succulents nursery in Solana Beach, CA, who pioneered succulent "undersea" gardens (a permanent installation is at the San Diego Botanic Garden); and Patrick Anderson of Fallbrook, an opera singer and Huntington Botanical Gardens volunteer who for over 30 years has combined his horticultural expertise with a remarkable eye for design (Fig. 16).

Fig. 10 Afternoon sun illuminates *Aloe arborescens*. This common-in-California, clustering aloe is endemic to southeastern Africa.

Fig. 11 A dozen different *Aeonium* species and cultivars thrive here. Every other year, at the end of their summer dormancy, I pull leggy aeoniums out of the ground, roots and all. I cut off rosettes, leaving enough stem to anchor each, then replant them in root-free, amended soil. By spring, these pinwheel plants are picture-perfect.

Fig. 12 The farther from my house, the looser and simpler the garden. *Acacias* bloom in February alongside large agaves that contrast with the trees' finer textures. Such big, spiky succulents are not for everyone, but their dramatic shapes undeniably lend visual interest.

Fig. 13 *Cercidium* x 'Desert Museum'

Fig. 14 What many aficionados love most about succulents is their remarkable symmetry. This is *Euphorbia polygona* 'Snowflake'.

Fig. 15 *Aeonium* 'Garnet', lower right, echoes the burgundy of *Mangave* 'Mission to Mars'.

Fig. 16 *Erythrina* x *sykesii* and *Aloe ferox* in Patrick Anderson's garden.

In 2005 I contracted with horticultural publisher Timber Press to do a book on selecting and using succulents in gardens and landscapes. *Designing with Succulents* (2007, revised 2017), became an international bestseller with a French edition. Next came *Succulent Container Gardens* (2010), a guide for enthusiasts who have limited space or live in difficult climates. *Succulents Simplified* (2013) followed, written for beginners; it was also published in Chinese (Figs. 17 through 20).

As recently as 25 years ago, few mainstream nurseries offered more than a smattering of succulents. The gardening public, unaware of the differences, lumped soft varieties into "cactus." *Crassula ovata* (jade), an excellent low-water garden shrub, was dismissed then (and often still is) as "too common." And as *Aloe* enthusiast Phuc Huynh mentions in my 2025 CSSA convention YouTube video, people persist in calling any aloe "*Aloe vera*." Even so, gardeners from newbies to nursery owners are developing a deeper appreciation for succulents—a gradual but positive trend.

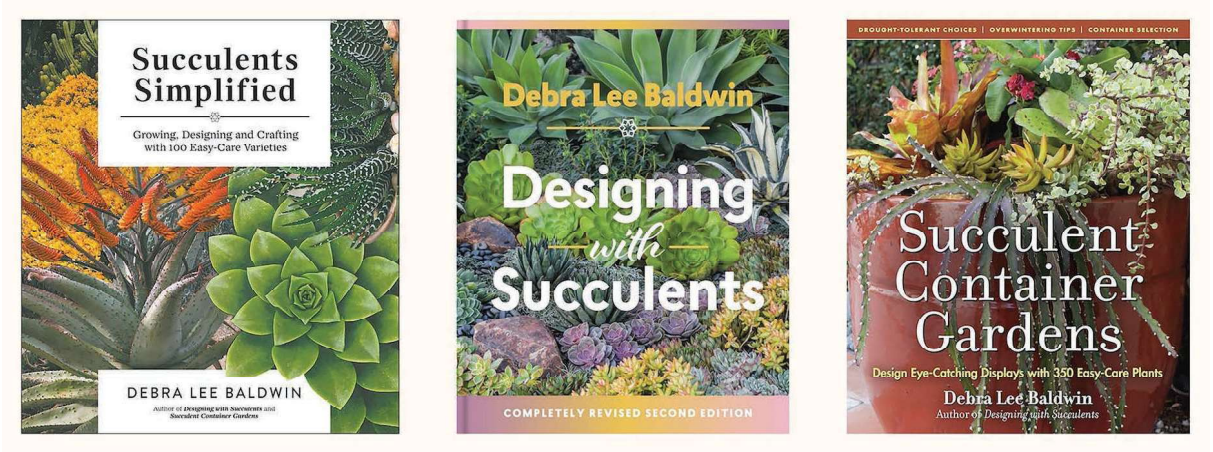


Fig. 17 Books by Debra Lee Baldwin

Fig. 18 The Chinese edition of *Succulents Simplified* shows the late Don Hunt staging *Fockea edulis* in one of his art pots at a San Diego CSS show and sale. The text mentions the CSSA, and a Chinese caption at right has "Grape Nuts" in English—no doubt because it defied translation. (I'd used the cereal metaphorically to describe the fine textured topdressing that surrounds the stacked crassula.) Other words and phrases here, evidently lacking Chinese equivalents, include "staging," "caudiciform," "earth tone," and "Los Angeles Arboretum."

Fig. 19 Hybridizer Kelly Griffin stands under the bloom spike of *Agave* 'Blue Flame', a David Verity cross of *Agave shawii* and *A. attenuata*. At the time Griffin worked for Rancho Soledad Nursery north of San Diego. We were in the large garden of his then-employer, the late Jerry Hunter. (From the Chinese edition of *Succulents Simplified*.)

Fig. 20 *Agave* 'Blue Flame' and *A. americana* 'Mediopicta Alba' flank my steps. Yellow euonymus shrubs lend contrasting color and texture.

While researching *Designing with Succulents* in 2005, I cruised upscale San Diego neighborhoods, occasionally doing "drive-by shootings" of notable specimens. I also found succulents at botanic gardens, surrounding fire stations, and at historic California missions; and interviewed growers, collectors, and savvy homeowners. With few exceptions (most notably the plant descriptions on the San Marcos Growers website) online information was either scarce or unreliable (Figs. 21 and 22).

Fig. 21 While driving through Rancho Santa Fe, I spotted this mature *Dracaena draco* with *Senecio mandraliscae* growing beneath it. A red-flowering *Euphorbia milii* is at lower left.

Fig. 22 *Agave franzosinii* at Mission San Juan Capistrano, 2005.

The more I worked with professional photographers and landscape designers, the better I understood vantage points, outdoor rooms, and focal points. I discovered how artistic principles of contrast and repetition enhance gardens through color, texture, shape, and patterns. Then and now I use what I call "the *Sunset* aesthetic" to evaluate whether an in-ground vignette or container combo is pleasing to look at and practical. When selecting images for videos, articles, and presentations, I ask myself: Is this magazine-worthy? Does it offer value to readers and viewers? Is it timely and relevant? (Fig. 23).

These examples of contrast and repetition are in my own garden (Figs. 24 through 31).

In addition to understanding a plant's needs for sun or shade, providing proper irrigation and drainage, and improving the soil, succulent garden designers almost always include rocks. Inorganic topdressings and boulders not only create visual interest and unify the design, but also help suppress weeds, conserve moisture, moderate temperature extremes, and reduce the impact of heavy rain (Fig. 32).

Fig. 23 This plant-pot pairing is by the late Larry Grammer, whose own collection routinely earned awards at the InterCity Show at the Los Angeles Arboretum. He created it and numerous other pairings for sale at California Cactus Center in Pasadena. Lines and colors of a container by Arizona artist Mike Cone repeat those of *Notocactus scopa*. Brown repeats in plants, topdressing, and pot; white contrasts.

Fig. 24 The color green repeats and leaf shapes contrast in a sunlit combo of *Agave* 'Blue Flame' and *Dasylirion wheeleri*.

When Timber Press asked me to revise and update *Designing with Succulents* in 2017, selecting photos was a challenge—not due to scarcity, but because there were too many beautifully designed succulent gardens to choose from. How far we'd come! (Figs. 33 and 34).

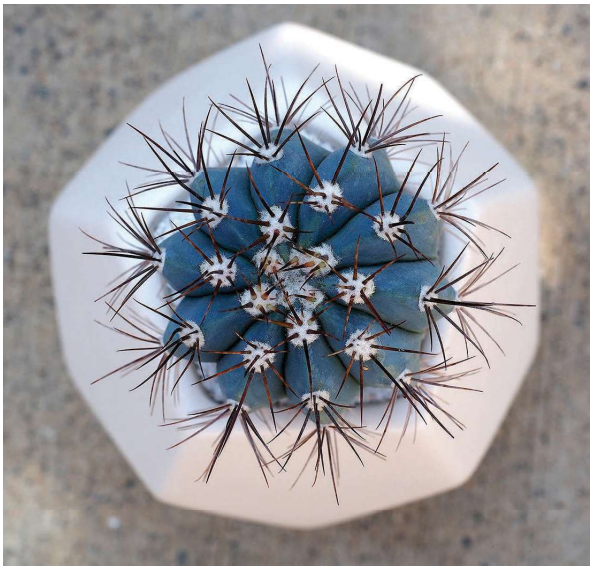


Fig. 25 White areoles repeat the white of the pot, and contrasting with them are blue *Melocactus azureus* and its black spines—which also emphasize the composition's symmetry.

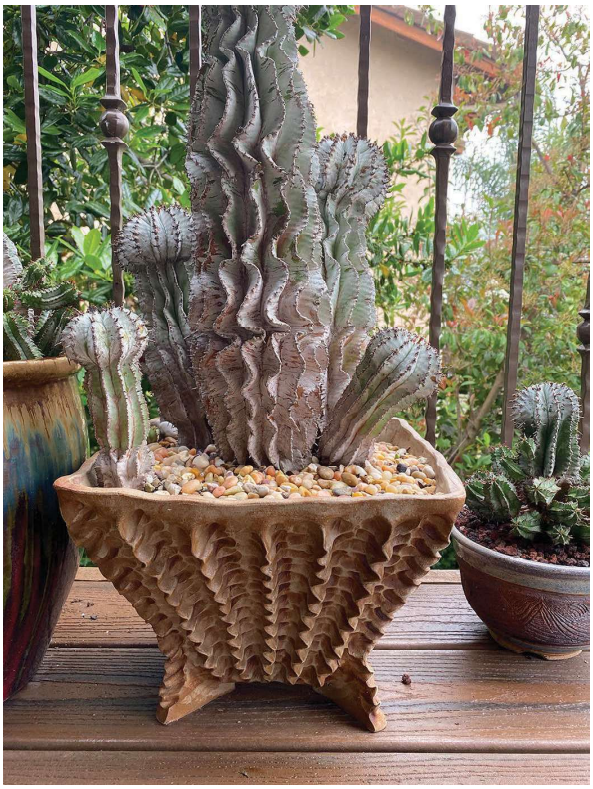


Fig. 26 A ribbed pot by Mark Muradian repeats the ripples of *Euphorbia polygona* 'Snowflake'.

Fig. 27 *Peperomia* 'Ruby Cascade' contrasts in color and form with *Aeonium urbicum* rosettes.

Fig. 28 The pot's circular pattern (lower left) and its reddish-brown glaze repeat in *Mammillaria spinosissima*. Green flesh contrasts with bronzy spines, the patterning of which has dots visually similar to the pebble topdressing. Pot by Susan Aach.

Fig. 29 *Yucca aloifolia*, *Kalanchoe* 'Dragonfire', and trailing variegated *Portulacaria afra* offer repetitions of red and green as well as contrasting textures and forms.

Fig. 30 *Adromiscus cristatus* and *Haworthiopsis venosa* ssp. *tessellata* echo colors and textures in a pot by Kitoi.

Fig. 31 No color in the garden is as striking nor visible from afar as white. *Romneya coulteri* (matilija poppy) a Mexican perennial, spreads via underground runners and needs no irrigation once established.

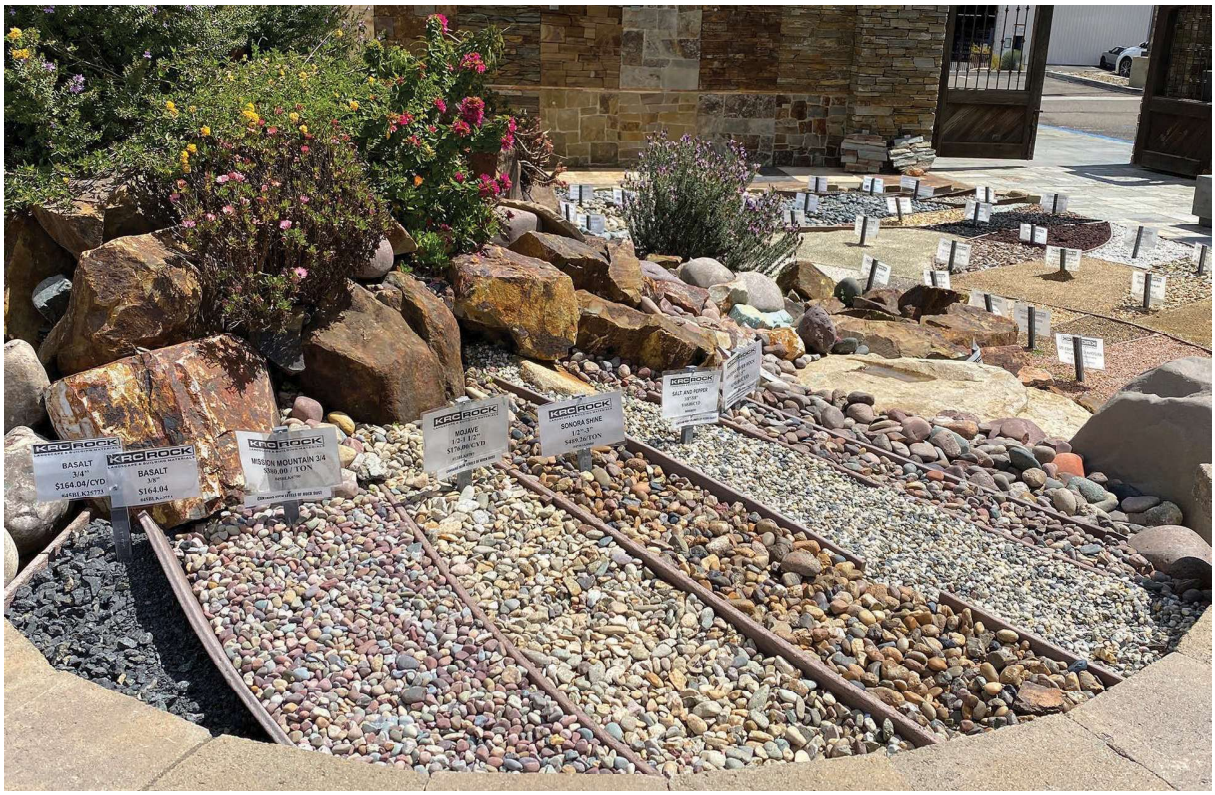
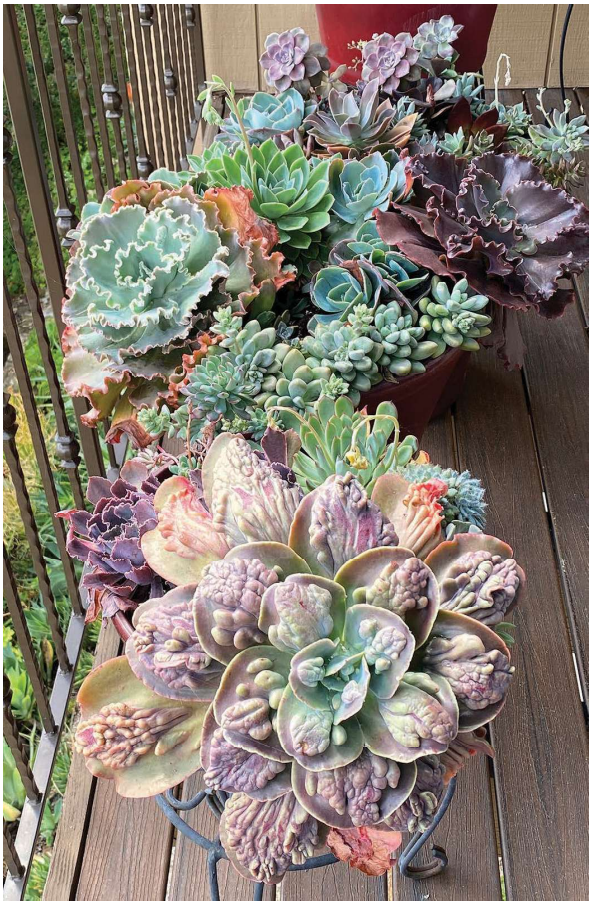


Fig. 32 KRC Rock, a San Diego landscape and building materials supplier, displays a palette of topdressings.

Fig. 33 Frontispiece of *Designing with Succulents*, second edition (2017). The color, shape, and form of *Dracaena draco* (dragon tree) repeat those of a nearby *Dasylirion wheeleri* in Jeanne Meadow's Fallbrook, CA garden.

Fig. 34 Aloe collector Hannah Jarson's front yard includes orange- and red-flowering *Aloe cameronii* alongside red *Euphorbia milii*. *Echinocactus grusonii* (golden barrels) provide contrasting texture and spherical forms, and repeat the yellow of *Portulacaria afra* 'Variegata'. *Agave* 'Blue Glow' graces the foreground.



As interest grew, so did availability. Wholesale growers like Altman Plants in Vista, CA began providing a wider variety of succulents to garden centers across the country. I'm 15 minutes from Altman's retail outlet, Oasis Water Efficient Gardens. Among the nursery's perfectly grown succulents and cacti are patented cultivars by Altman hybridizers Renee O'Connell and Kelly Griffin. Also nearby is Desert Theater nursery, a multiacre mecca of mature specimens; and Waterwise Botanicals nursery, with a vast assortment of 1- and 5-gallon ornamental succulents and low-water companion plants. (See a complete list of succulent specialty nurseries in the San Diego area and beyond, with links and descriptions, on my website's San Diego Succulent Destinations page) (Figs. 35 through 41).

Suddenly it seemed everyone wanted succulents for flower beds, party favors, wreaths, patio plants, terrariums, package toppers, and more. Retail nurseries and florists scrambled to meet the demand with a broader selection of succulents in greater numbers. Petite succulents served as pet substitutes for residents of dorms, condos, and high-rises. And in bridal bouquets and tabletop arrangements, designers combined roses with echeverias in shades of blue, pink, lavender, and silvery gray (Fig. 42).

Fig. 35 *Echeveria* cultivars in my deck's potted garden came from Oasis Water Efficient Gardens nursery, Escondido, CA

Fig. 36 *Echeveria* 'Sea Dragon', patented by Altman plants, is a Renee O'Connell cultivar. Oasis' prices are between wholesale and retail.

Fig. 37 Altman Plants patented *Kalanchoe* 'Dragonfire' by Renee O'Connell in 2019. As with its *Kalanchoe luciae* (flapjack plant) parent, its inflorescences should be removed before they elongate and ruin the plant.

Fig. 38 Among an ever-varying selection of Kelly Griffin aloes at Oasis is *A.* 'Swordfish' (mid-right). Its seed parent is *Aloe* 'Sunset'; its pollen parent, a variety of *Aloe divaricata*. Griffin, Altman Plants' succulent plant development manager, also is the San Diego CSS president.

Fig. 39 *Gasteraloe* x 'Tarantula', a 2018 Kelly Griffin cross, has a cat's-tongue texture. Small protrusions that blanket leaves appear sharp but aren't. I paired it with a sandy-surfaced Susan Aach pot.

Fig. 40 Aloes and crassulas bloom in midwinter at Desert Theater nursery in Escondido, CA. Behind them grow *Aloe bainesii* trees and columnar, greenish-yellow *Euphorbia ammak* 'Variegata'.

Fig. 41 A dish garden I created for Garden Design magazine is also on my YouTube channel ("How to Make a Mini High Desert Cactus Garden"). The concept is a hike through an otherworldly desert to distant mountains. Succulents include crested cacti and euphorbias, *Cleistocactus strausii* (silver torch), *Aloe* 'Christmas Carol', *Euphorbia enopla* (to suggest saguaros) and *Mammillaria fragilis* as diminutive barrel cacti—all from Oasis nursery.

Fig. 42 A photo shoot I expedited for *Better Homes & Gardens* features San Diego floral designer Robyn Foreman. To create a dramatic hanging arrangement, she combined mauve 'Sterling Silver' roses, *Echeveria* 'Perle von Nurnberg' rosettes, and trailing *Sedum morganianum* (burro tail).

Soon stylized cacti—opuntias, barrels, and saguaros—began appearing on clothing and home décor. At the 2016 Succulent Celebration at Waterwise Botanicals nursery, I predicted that rosette succulents would become as common as daisies and roses on textiles. The same year, I collaborated with my publisher on a succulent-themed adult coloring book (Figs. 43 and 44).

In my seven-session online class "Stunning Succulent Arrangements," co-developed and filmed by Craftsy (also known as Bluprint), I demonstrate how to wire succulent rosettes to wood picks (slender faux stems). Such bouquets make good gifts because they're unusual, long-lasting, need no water, and the cuttings can be disassembled and planted (Fig. 45).

I researched spineless opuntia hoping it might help combat world hunger, but soon found out cultivars tend to revert. Renowned botanist Luther Burbank had been trying to breed a reliable variety before his death in 1926 to use as cattle feed. In my garden, several kinds of spineless (or nearly so) opuntias serve as background plants. They're a deterrent for trespassers and a fire break, and tender new pads are edible (*nopales*). Unfortunately I can't tell which have glochids and which don't, unless I touch them! (Fig. 46).

For decades, in addition to having to cut water usage due to drought, we homeowners in the West have worried about wildfire. Because succulents store water in fleshy tissues, the plants help with both concerns. It makes sense to replace high-maintenance, water-thirsty lawns and woody shrubs with succulents large and small (Fig. 47).

Fig. 43 I model a cactus shower curtain in a home goods store for a photo to post on social media. It was 2018, around the time succulent-themed items were coming into vogue.

Fig. 44 This 15-inch-wide *Echeveria imbricata* pillow (from Flora! in Holyoke, MA) was a gift from my *Sunset* editor to celebrate my being named Horticulturist of the Year by the San Diego Horticultural Society.

Fig. 45 I use white or colored sand to keep the faux stems of succulent bouquets securely in place.

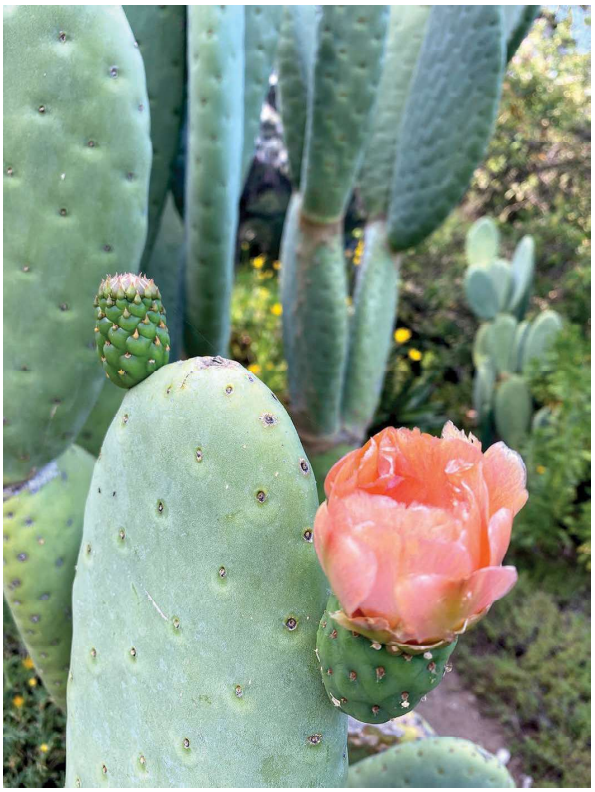


Fig. 46 Flower color suggests this is *Opuntia ficus-indica* 'Burbank Spineless' or a variety of it. A cutting I planted took 10 years to grow large enough to bloom.

Fig. 47 In September, 2020, the sky turned an eerie coral due to smoke from a wildfire farther north. More recently, a fire department inspector advised us to prune trees and shrubs near our house and propane tank, but "leave the succulents." Above: A neighbor's garden.

Several years ago, San Diego's KUSI-TV asked me to be interviewed with a homeowner whose mass plantings of succulents had "saved her home" during a wildfire that leveled neighboring houses. I didn't want to make exaggerated claims. During the news segment I explained that succulents "are one more weapon in a homeowner's arsenal against wildfire." It's well known that whether a structure burns depends on factors like the fire's intensity and duration, wind speed and direction, available fuel, and sometimes just luck (Fig. 48).

How rapidly a plant catches on fire indicates its potential to transmit flames, so I decided to test how long it takes a half dozen common garden succulents to burn, including *Aloe arborescens*, opuntia pads, and *Crassula ovata*. When tossed onto a blazing firepit, fresh succulent cuttings cooked and collapsed. In contrast, oak and bamboo branches burst into flames. In a video on my YouTube channel ("Do Succulents Catch on Fire?") we kept succulent cuttings atop flames for five minutes—the average time it takes a wind-driven wildfire to ravage a property (Figs. 49 and 50).

Fig. 48 Despite enduring wildfire, these scorched *Aloe arborescens* have green centers. What do you think? Could they be trimmed and replanted as cuttings?

Fig. 49 Dr. Camille Newton of Bonsall, CA (at upper right), surveys the *Euphorbia tirucalli*, *Senecio vitalis*, and *Aeonium* 'Garnet' she had started from cuttings several years earlier. The plants' ability to halt a wildfire two days earlier was unexpected; her goal had been to surround her house with colorful, waterwise plants.

During the 20-teens, I did book signings at botanical venues, events, and garden clubs nationwide, from Epcot Center in Orlando to the Honolulu Garden Club. My audience was—and still is—homeowners, designers, and enthusiasts who prioritize easy-care, readily available plants. Of course, perceptions of what's "easy" vary widely depending on an individual's experience and interest.

It's a common misconception that these dry-climate sun-lovers will grow anywhere. I tell eager gardeners in less-than-ideal climates, "Any plant will grow where its native conditions are replicated. If you live where weather can harm succulents, you'll need a well-lit, climate-controlled, ventilated, indoor growing area—ideally, a greenhouse."

Fig. 50 The home next door to the Newtons was destroyed except for a drooping *Agave vilmoriniana* (octopus agave).

When The *Wall Street Journal* asked me to explain to their readers how to grow succulents outdoors year-round in the Northeast, I was tempted to reply, "They can't." But my publicist at Timber Press was delighted at the opportunity, so I tackled it. My resulting "Succulents in Snow" article features sedums, sempervivums, and hardy ice plants (*Delosperma* species) —a small fraction of the succulents in my books (Fig. 51).

By 2020 most succulent growers here in Southern California were simply too busy to package and ship plants. Enter Mountain Crest Gardens, a Northern California nursery that specializes in mail-order succulents. In five years, from 2013 to 2018, the company experienced a tenfold annual increase in gross revenue. By 2018 MCG was shipping succulents to over 8,000 cities in all 50 states and had an online inventory of 900 species and cultivars. Their competitors, of course, are now worldwide. Yet succulents sold mainly in 2-inch pots leave some customers wondering if the only way to get larger specimens is to rent a van and drive to the Southwest.

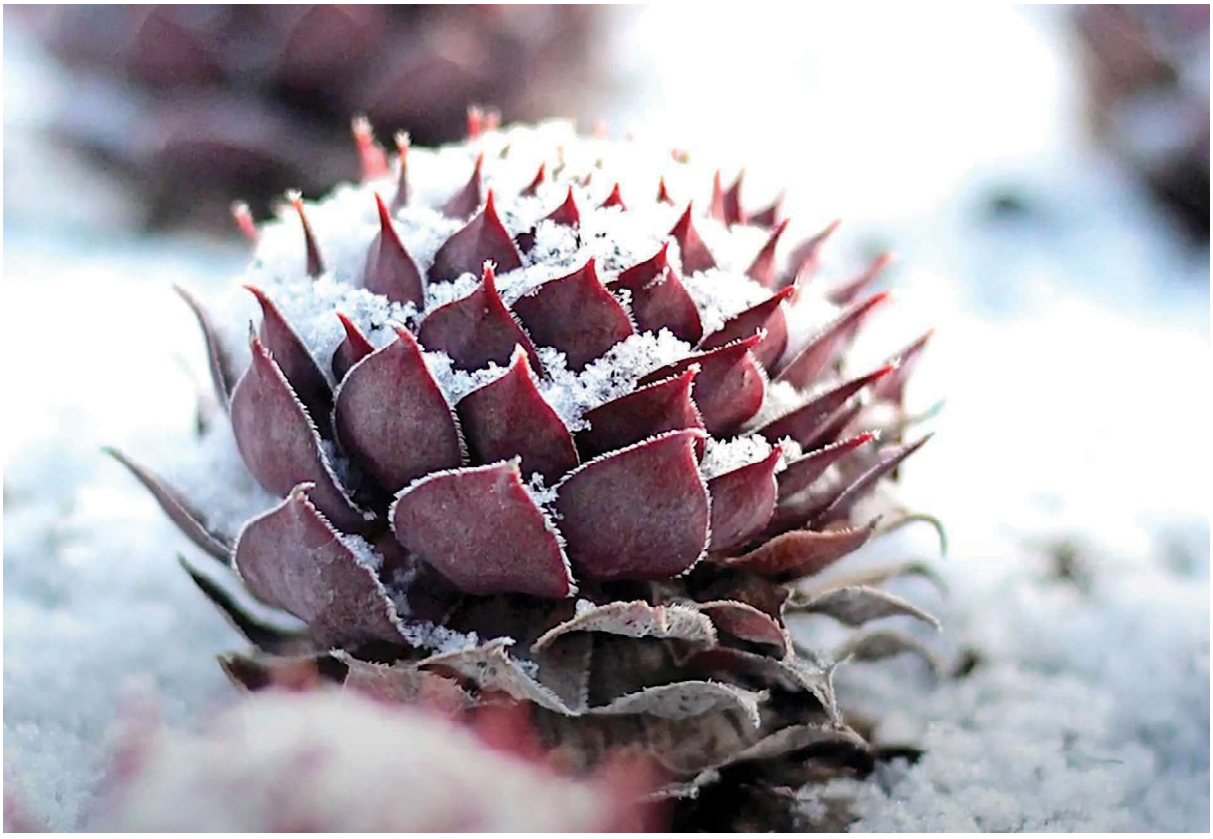


Fig. 51 A lovely photo of a snow-covered sempervivum accompanied my *Wall Street Journal* article. Photo: Mountain Crest Gardens.

To meet the skyrocketing demand, Internet-savvy entrepreneurs like Tari Colbry (find her on Instagram @littlesucculentshop_) (Fig. 52), have pioneered an inventive retail model. Colbry and other succulent enthusiasts with loyal social media followings livestream their trips to growers and nurseries, taking orders in real time. They handpick, package and ship plants—often bare root—straight to customers' doors. Many even act as personal shoppers via FaceTime, or track down choice specimens to buy and sell on Etsy, Facebook Marketplace, and specialized online shops.

I encourage my viewers, site visitors, and newsletter subscribers to attend CSS meetings, shows, and sales. There, they'll meet knowledgeable growers, pick up design inspiration, discover rare and unusual plants, and—best of all—experience the thrill of the hunt.

As a semi-retired content creator, I continue to find joy in interviewing experts and exploring gardens, my antennae aquiver for topics and photos to engage and entertain my followers. Another book? No, thank you—I prefer what print can't deliver: the freedom to revise and enrich content instantly. My ad-free website, updated frequently, offers well-researched information to succulent enthusiasts worldwide. What could be more rewarding? (Fig. 53).

If I've sparked your curiosity, do visit debraleebaldwin.com and also enjoy my YouTube channel. For videos specific to the CSSA, browse my YouTube playlist: *"Cactus & Succulent Society Experts, Shows, Gardens, and Collections."*

Fig. 52 During a live virtual shopping session at Oasis nursery, Tari Colbry held up her phone to introduce me to her client.

Fig. 53 One of my most popular YouTube videos is *Carolyn's Dragon Tree Garden*. It was designed by succulent expert, long-time CSSA member, and landscape professional Michael Buckner.