Succulents are plants with thickened, fleshy leaves, stems and/or roots that can store water for later use. This quality helps them adapt to arid regions and habitats, and to survive periods of drought. Desert-dwelling cactuses are the classic example, but we have succulents growing wild in the Pacific Northwest as well, native to our dry coastal, rocky and alpine environments.

Many succulents come from frost-free zones and will not grow outdoors here. Others do well in our cooler climate and can impart a distinctive look to our gardens. (A good example is the popular stonecrop Hylotelephium ‘Herbstfreude’ AUTUMN JOY, a hybrid perennial groundcover with upright stems of fleshy, blue-green foliage and rose-red, star-like fall flowers.) An added bonus is that they can thrive in our dry Seattle summers with little or no supplemental water.

I recently became more interested in succulents because I want to make my garden less dependent on summer watering. After retiring two years ago, my wife and I are traveling a lot now and need a lower-maintenance landscape. Instead of installing an automatic irrigation system, I plan to replace water-thirsty plants with summer-dry ones.

**Inspired by Sissinghurst**

On a recent visit to Sissinghurst Castle, in England, I was blown away by the newly restored Delos Garden, managed by the National Trust. The original Delos Garden at Sissinghurst was created in the late 1930s by owners Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicholson, inspired by their visit to the Greek island of Delos. They tried growing the Mediterranean plant species that they observed on Delos in their heavy Kentish clay, but the plants all died, and they abandoned the idea.

About six years ago, the Trust decided to reinstate West’s and Nicholson’s original vision, so the garden staff dug out three feet of that clay, replaced it with free-draining soil, and replanted with Greek plants, including succulents such as euphorbias and sedums. The Delos plants are now thriving.

Luckily, I don’t have similar soil challenges in my Wallingford garden! My little slice of the planet is blessed with well-draining loam, in which hardy succulents should do well as long as I provide them with a generous amount of sunlight. Following are descriptions of some of the succulent plants that I have researched and intend to try out.

**Agave parryi** *(Parry’s agave)*

Parry’s agave—native to desert lands and high-elevation forests in the U.S. Southwest and Mexico—is your best bet for growing an agave in Seattle. It produces a rosette of large, succulent, blue-gray evergreen leaves between two and three feet tall and wide. Dark-tan to brown spines grow from the tips and margins of the leaves, adding an interesting color contrast. Mature plants (10 to 30 years old) may bloom, sending...
up a huge, 12-foot, asparagus-like stalk covered in clusters of creamy-yellow flowers. The show is spectacular but also signals the end of life for the plant, which dies shortly after setting seed (a phenomenon known as monocarpy). The key to growing the plant outdoors is good drainage. Parry’s agave—famous for its use in the production of mescal—is more likely to succumb to wet soil rather than cold. Some sources say it is hardy to 5 degrees Fahrenheit!

*Nolina nelsonii* (Nelson’s blue bear grass)

Sometimes mistaken for an agave—because of its dense rosette of long, strappy, blue-green leaves—*Nolina nelsonii* creates a striking accent in the garden. Native to desert and montane regions in northern Mexico, this succulent develops a trunk over time, giving it an arborescent appearance. The thick, grass-like leaves have finely toothed margins and radiate from the center of the plant, reaching up to six feet tall and four feet wide. I first noticed Nelson’s blue bear grass 20 years ago in the McVay Courtyard at the Center for Urban Horticulture. The specimen has since been relocated to the nearby Stormwater Garden—where it bloomed in 2022, producing a six-foot stalk covered in fragrant, creamy-white flowers. Unlike agave, however, *Nolina nelsonii* is not fully monocarpic; typically, the main plant does die back but a new plant forms at the base of the rosette.

*Opuntia fragilis* (brittle prickly pear)

Brittle prickly pear is the only cactus native to Western Washington and is found in rainshadow areas of the Olympic Mountains, such as the San Juan Islands and Whidbey Island. The plant grows no more than six inches tall and spreads to a foot or so wide, producing spiny, rounded pads that are only a few inches in size. Bright-yellow flowers with creamy greenish-to-reddish centers appear in late spring and produce edible fruit. It’s a striking plant! Gardeners who fall in love with cacti often grow many varieties in pots but have to keep them inside, at least for the cold season, to avoid frost and winter wet. You don’t need to do this with brittle prickly pear, which is the cold-hardiest *Opuntia*, occurring as far north as central British Columbia! True to its common and species names, its pads break off easily—an adaptation allowing the species to propagate vegetatively.

*Lewisia columbiana* (Columbian lewisia)

Another diminutive native succulent I want to try out is Columbian lewisia, a herbaceous perennial that grows in rocky, alpine areas of the Pacific Northwest. It produces a low rosette of narrow, fleshy, evergreen leaves and bears beautiful, small, white flowers with...
pink stripes on stalks that reach up to a foot high. Like the other plants mentioned so far, it requires fast-draining soil; but, unlike them, can tolerate a little shade. The entire *Lewisia* genus of around 20 species is native to western North America, and the scientific name commemorates explorer Meriwether Lewis, who encountered the plants in the early 1800s.

### Yucca filamentosa (Adam’s needle)

Yuccas are a wonderful group of evergreen succulents that add spiky foliar contrast to the usual rounded leaves of other plants in the garden. They also offer spectacular blooms in mid- to late-summer, bearings dozens of creamy-white bell flowers atop stalks that reach up to six feet high. Although they tolerate some shade, they flower best in full sun and need no summer water once established. *Yucca filamentosa* is a small shrub native to beach scrub and dunes in the U.S. Southeast (including Texas and Florida). Usually trunkless, it produces a rosette of sword-shaped green leaves up to about 10 feet tall with handsome, curling, white threads on the margins. It’s hardy from USDA Zones 3 to 9, and lots of variegated cultivars are available, such as ‘Color Guard’, which has a yellow strip running up the center of each leaf.

### More ideas of hardy succulents

This is just a sampling of the plants I intend to try. I’m also considering native sedums (see the sidebar), ice plants (*Delosperma* species), and others. For more information about these resourceful plants, consider joining the Cascade Cactus and Succulent Society (https://cascadecss.com). Also visit the succulent display at the Skagit County Master Gardener Discovery Garden on Memorial Highway, in Mount Vernon (skagitmg.org/home/discovery-garden).

### Our Native Sedums

A number of sedums native to the Pacific Coast make useful garden groundcovers, thriving in full sun and well-drained soil and needing little, if any, supplemental summer water.

- *Sedum oreganum* (Oregon stonecrop) is a mat-forming perennial with small, fleshy green leaves that turn bronze-red in midsummer. It bears bright-yellow, star-shaped flowers just above the foliage in summer that are magnets for native bumblebees and other insects. You’ll find some lovely patches of Oregon stonecrop growing around the circular bench area in the Cascadia Forest at the Arboretum.

- *Sedum spathulifolium* (Pacific stonecrop) forms mats of basal rosettes featuring half- to one-inch, spoon-shaped, blue-green leaves that are tinged purple. Light-yellow flowers sit atop the foliage on short, thick stems in spring and summer.

- *Sedum lanceolatum* (spearleaf stonecrop), as its common name suggests, features pointed, blue-green to reddish-green foliage. The yellow, star-shaped flowers are borne on stalks that reach up to six inches in height. The species is the host plant for the Rocky Mountain Parnassian butterfly. 

**Phil Wood** is a writer and retired garden designer serving on the “Arboretum Bulletin” Editorial Board. Visit his website at www.philwoodgardens.com.