



Do's and Don'ts of Succulent Garden Design

Source: Debra Lee Baldwin, author of *Designing with Succulents* and *Succulent Container Gardens*. <http://www.debraleebaldwin.com>

Aim to express your individual style by creating a garden that meets your practical criteria (low-water, low-maintenance) and that pleases you whenever you see it. A garden is never finished and plants are ever-changing. It's advisable to continually evaluate, edit and improve your garden.

Characteristics of a well-designed succulent garden ~

- The overall look is natural, lush and sophisticated. It can be sleek but is not barren.
- Plants are clustered rather than plunked here and there.
- The terrain has hills and valleys, and perhaps a dry streambed.
- Boulders are incorporated into the design and serve as a backdrop for the plants.
- Major design elements (hardscape, large agaves, decorative pots, boulders) are in scale with the setting, and are selected and situated with the architecture of the house in mind.
- The garden is user-friendly. Pathways and other design elements (such as benches) make it inviting and accessible.
- Curbside plantings allow visitors to enter and leave parked cars easily.
- Bare dirt is covered with natural-looking gravel, stones or boulders; or ground covers such as iceplant, *Sedum rubrotinctum* or blue senecio.
- Hoses and other utilitarian items are hidden.
- Small, medium and tall plants are combined in pleasing vignettes.
- Lacy trees provide dappled shade.
- Fundamental design principles—such as contrast and repetition—enhance the composition.
- Intriguing color combinations and textures delight the senses.
- It is truly a *garden*. It welcomes and captivates visitors, and suggests, through elements of whimsy, the owner's personality.

Characteristics of a poorly designed succulent garden ~ (But see exceptions below.)

- It looks stark and austere. Lonely-looking plants are spaced widely.
- The ground is pancake flat.
- Plants are arranged like soldiers, in lines, or dotted equidistant from each other.
- Gravel is an unnatural color, such as white, black or salmon pink. Worse, there are several odd colors of gravel.
- Jarring elements, such as cute decorations better suited to a cottage garden, conflict with the garden's sophisticated lines.
- Non-succulent plants, such as roses or bougainvillea, call too much attention to themselves, thereby detracting from the elegance of the composition.
- Utilitarian items such as trash cans or hoses are in plain view.

Exceptions:

The key is to first understand what works, so when you break the rules, you do it intentionally. For example, it is possible to incorporate dramatic companion plants that work well with succulents. Or to create a wonderful succulent garden that is flat, with plants arranged in lines. Succulents have a crisp geometry that lends itself to linear designs, and such plantings can beautifully enhance homes—especially those with contemporary architecture.

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