Start a succulent garden

Source: Ashley Osborne, 4-H youth development specialist

Since they are easy to grow and low maintenance, succulents are a great introduction project for beginning gardeners. Succulents include cacti, agave, aloe, euphorbia, jade and echeverias. These plants can survive in hot, dry climates like deserts. They store moisture in their stems and leaves from rainy periods and have slower evaporation rates than other plants.

With just a few materials and plants, youth can easily create a succulent or desert dish garden. They will need a dish, pan or tray that is at least 2 inches deep, small succulents and pea gravel, sand and potting mix for a growing medium. They can also add other items such as wood, small figurines and rocks to the garden for interest.

To make the garden, clean the container and fill it about one-quarter-inch full of pea gravel. Then, add a three-quarter-inch thick layer of sand. Top it off with a three-quart-inch layer of potting mix. When all three are added, the growing medium should have a one-quarter-inch space from the top of the container.

 Remove the plants from the original pots. If a young person purchased a cactus, they would want to use gloves, tongs and tweezers to remove the plant, so they don’t get stuck by its thorns. Adults should stay close by to assist with plant removal if needed.

 Arrange the plants in the garden to make sure all can be seen. Some simple designs are taller plants in the middle and shorter plants on the sides or taller plants in the back and shorter ones in the front.

 Make holes in the growing medium large enough to accommodate the plants’ roots. This may mean removing some of the medium from the container and that is perfectly fine. Plant the larger succulents first and press the growing medium around the roots and base of each plant.

If you chose to add other decorative items, now is the time to add them to the container.

 Immediately water the garden, being careful not to overwater. Drain any excess water from the dish by carefully tilting it.

 Remember these plants love hot, dry conditions. Choose a room that gets a lot of sun and has low humidity.

Overwatering is a big concern. Keep the growing medium relatively dry. Youth may only need to water the plants every two to three months.

Occasionally rotate the dish so all plants get equal sunshine. If any plant outgrows the container, move it to a larger dish.

This project is a Kentucky 4-H Horticulture and Plant Science Fair Project. If their county fair has not already occurred, youth or their parents can check with their county 4-H youth development agent for information on how the 4-H’ers can enter the project in the fair. If the fair is already past, they may want to consider entering the project in the county fair next year.

Kentucky 4-H has developed a video on how to construct a desert dish garden. It is available on the Kentucky 4-H Facebook page. You can also find more information in the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Publication “Marking a desert dish garden.” It is available online at <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/4AH/4AH09PA/4AH09PA.pdf> or by contacting your (COUNTY NAME) office of the UK Cooperative Extension Service.

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