



Chinle Cactus & Succulent Society

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It's OK to Kill Plants

February 2017

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The best growers of cacti and succulents have killed the most numbers of plants. So if you want to be an amazingly successful plant grower, get to work killing some. In the grand scheme of things, there is no other way to know the absolute limits of what a plant can handle until you've crossed that line and find yourself with a deflated spiny balloon instead of a plant in your flowerpot.

Why do plants die?

Know that ol' Momma nature kills most of her plants before they reach maturity. "Survival of the fittest" means "Death to everyone else." Plants less suited to their natural setting get killed off, and those more suited live on. And to keep that balance, generally, in nature the majority are killed and the blooming beautiful plants we see hiking are the minority which have survived up to that point. The factors which can kill a plant are many: water, temperature, soil, light, air movement, attackers from bacteria to deer, and others.

Think of it this way: A plant has a certain amount of stress it can, in fact, handle and be just fine. On the invisible gauge of plant health, between that thin green wedge of "Thriving!" and that red zone labeled: "Death!" there is a very wide wedge of "stressed but fine." Plants in nature spend most of their time here. And among the different stresses a plant can have, it's often not one, but a combination which stress a plant. Sometimes it is just one stress – death by salt poisoning because the dog peed on it. Sometimes it's a combination death—the plant was weakened, say, by drought stress for too long when it suddenly received no light: case in which two things killed the plant.

Knowledge from friends or a good book can provide the specific ways that plants "communicate" exactly which stress is nagging them to death. A little bit of learning empowers a grower of plants at home to a fast-track of improvement. Perhaps one of the most common stresses among cacti is etiolation – a fancy word for the plant stretching for light because there is not enough. This is what turns formerly cute little balls of cacti into awkward footballs and Hershey's Kiss-shaped things.

As the home care givers, we are the architects of the plant's environment. If they die, we have the choice to see it two (and a half) ways: (A) We don't understand the plant's needs and didn't give it those, or, (get ready for a paradigm shift here) (B) That plant was not suited to how we tend to provide for our plants, and for fun, (B.2) (which is more common among expert or long-time growers of plants) We knew the plant's needs but did not provide them. As in "Oops, I left that tropical cactus outside in October when the first frost happened," or, my favorite "Aw dang, I went on holiday and forgot to tell my roommate not to water the cactus when he waters the rest of the houseplants."

One giant trick to growing new plants, and especially cacti, is to understand where they come from. They are equipped for that place but we can fool them into being happy in our homes. For instance, the famous living stone cacti, from Africa, like to be cool and extremely sunny and lightly watered in winter, but almost no water in summer. Because that's what it's like in their corner of Africa. Water in summer tends to be their death in most of our hands: they essentially drown while asleep.

Autopsy for Education

Look at those dead plants and see what they can say from the grave. This is where "reading" your plant's stresses gets extreme. A rotten base, turning brown, or smelly? Plant fell over? Or, lots of yellowing lower leaves of succulents? Probably overwatering. White change of color, especially facing the sun? Sunburn – probably moved into strong sunlight too fast to adapt. It's ironic how plants from the hottest, sunniest places on earth are still capable of sunburn if they've been in the dark for long and then moved quickly to the sun. Shriveling up/shrinking, or a hard skin surface forming? Probably under watering. Cacti still like water, just much less. The top of a barrel/ball cacti turning into a point and getting tall? Or, new growth is thin and pale? Etiolation: too little light. White fuzzy cotton in the nooks and cracks of the plant? Mealybug attack. Suddenly turned into a heap of dark green jelly when the nights were cold? Perhaps a tender plant has literally frozen. Bright yellow tips of leaves which quickly die off. Perhaps over fertilizing, in essence salt poisoning. Different varieties are prone to different problems, and can exhibit them a bit differently. Some more uncommon and subtle stresses, like water pH issues or soil nutrient deficiencies may be harder to identify.

This is where using the brain-borne mega-library of expertise from members of cacti clubs in person or online is an unmatched resource for help.

What do you do with what you learn?

Dead plants may tell you what was missing or excessive, so now you have choices of action.

Change your habits

Getting into a habit of, say, watering your potted cactus outdoors every Sunday, or watering your in-ground cactus garden once a month – maybe, every time the utility bill comes. This might be the breakthrough to sudden success with your plants.

Change the place

Maybe that cactus is stretching in the north window. Time to move it to the south window. Maybe the cactus is getting a little too wet when you water everything else, so you can change the potting mix to drain better with more lava-rock or perlite. Perhaps it's time to

Give up

This is legitimate. Sometimes no matter how hard you try, your lifestyle or home is not good for that plant. Or, the hassle to get it done is not worth the return. Living stones, African violets and ferns are not meant for me, for instance, because of poor winter light, traveling in summer, and being gone for more than 3 days, respectively. So I've quit the suffering and quit trying plants which barely survive (which often means barely die) in my care. I'm not giving up summer vacations for ferns, as much as they call me like dancing sirens. In fact, travel led me to embrace cacti. [Not literally, of course.] Along these same lines, I've finally given up on growing most plants that are adapted to acid soils, the wet Himalayas, and the cool-loving coastal succulents. And I'm not sad about it – I've embraced South American cacti and agaves because of their ease and the amazing variety they provide.

Concluding the death talk

It is for their known ease of care that cacti and succulents become a hobby for many folks, especially those who hate fickle, picky, prissy plants that want constant coddling. Cacti and succulents might need less, but they still need. And their needs are different. And any plant is easy in the right place, and any place is easy to grow a plant in if the right one is picked. So go out today, buy a plant and be okay with killing it. Then enjoy it when it surprises you and lives.