

POTS—WHY DO YOU USE THE ONES YOU USE?

By Sue Haffner

Have you ever thought about why you use the pots you do for your plants? Here are some factors to consider:

- Standard pot—this type is as tall as the diameter of the pot (4 inches across and 4 inches tall);
- Azalea or $\frac{3}{4}$ pot—this is three quarters the height of the diameter (4 inches across and 3 inches high, for instance);
- Bulb pan—this is one half the height of the diameter (4 inches across and only 2 inches high).

Many succulent growers prefer the azalea pot size, chiefly for aesthetic reasons—many specimen plants display better in such pots. The standard pot, especially for smaller plants, may taper too much and prove to be unstable. You run the risk of knocking over and damaging a prized plant. Watering is also affected by the type of pot used. When you pour water onto the surface of your pot, the taller the column of water and gravity will act longer and pull more water out of the pot. This is needed for aeration and for pulling excess salts and fertilizer out of the pot, rather than collecting on the soil surface.

To restate the watering situation: if you have two pots that hold the same volume of soil and one is tall and skinny and the other is short and wide, more water will remain in the soil of the shorter pot. You won't have to water as often, as the short pots don't dry out as fast.

The pot should be large enough to provide a comfortable finger width between the edge of the pot and the plant (spines included), for globular plants. Tall, columnar plants should have a pot whose diameter is about one half their heights. A cluster or clump of plants generally has a shallower root system than a single plant of the same diameter. It is also growing more laterally than vertically, so you should allow more space between the pot and plant.

Clay, plastic, or other materials? Well, clay pots, of course, allow water to evaporate out from all sides. Clay will also allow water in from all sides (such as by overhead spraying or from capillary matting). This exchange works to keep the roots cool, as well. Plastic keeps the soil wetter longer by allowing evaporation to occur only from the soil surface. Also, plastic pots stay free of salt build-up and algae growth longer than clay pots do.

Pots made of Styrofoam, glass, or glazed ceramics tend to act much like the plastic pots.

Pot colors? Dark colors absorb most of the light that hits them, while white or light colors reflect a lot of light. Algae may grow on the insides of white pots if they sit where they are hit by direct sunlight. If your plastic pots are subject to the vagaries of temperature throughout the year, they will deteriorate—grow brittle and crumble at your touch. Green pots seem to last longer than white pots.

Round or square? We have more aesthetic considerations here. If your plant is more-or-less round, put it in a round pot. Still, many succulents defy classification as to shape, which no doubt has led to the many free-form “artist’s” pots you see used for specimen plants.

How about the drainage? We all know that it is possible to grow succulents in containers without drainage holes—because we’ve seen this in the collection of one of our members! Still, most of us use pots with holes. Most commercial plastic pots have large drainage holes, so large, in fact that your soil mix escapes through them. Some of us use pieces of paper towel, used clothes dryer sheets, squares of hosiery material, squares of window screening, etc., in the bottom of the pot to hold in the soil. The paper will eventually deteriorate, but, by then, the plant’s root ball may have grown enough to hold the soil.

Top dressing: most succulent growers use gravel of various sizes and colors to top dress the soil in the pots. This can also keep a “tippy” plant supported; can keep the base of the plant drier, thus reducing the possibility of rot. Also, the gravel is decorative. Bear in mind that the top dressing also can make it difficult to judge whether the plant needs watering. Figure out a means whereby you can check the soil under the gravel.

Should you water newly repotted plants? The standard advice you read in all the books and articles is that you need to let your plant sit for several days to a week while any root damage that may have occurred will heal. Generally, the authors of these books are writing from climates unlike ours, where plants may be subject to extended periods of dark, cold, damp weather when they are in danger of attack by fungi. Some growers in our area water-in their newly repotted plants—just a bit, to settle the soil—and have never noticed any ill effects. You can decide for yourself which is the better course to take. Also, don’t put a newly repotted plant directly out in the sun. Let it rest for awhile in bright shade.

Remember that there is no perfect system that works for everyone. Experiment a bit and develop your own best technique. Good luck!