

Home & Garden Section

Clinton horticulturist shares DIY succulent care, dish garden creation

By Judith Brown
Staff Writer

The ease of care and ability to combine several varieties of plants in a single container have contributed to the popularity of succulents, and Clinton horticulturist Marc McVicker makes dish gardens throughout the year as gifts.

"I make most of them for Christmas and Valentines because they are so easy to care for," McVicker said, explaining that if located in a sunny window, overwatering is about the only reason that succulents will struggle.

McVicker said there are several benefits to creating your own dish garden rather than buying them pre-made.

"Most of them are packed with too many plants," he said. "These things are going to grow so you don't need to start out with too many plants."

Succulents are a very broad category with cactus and plants with different growth patterns, colors and propagation habits.

"For succulents it's all about texture, and I use the color wheel method to have contrasting colors," he said.

In one wide but shallow terra cotta pot, McVicker first uses a mixture of about one-quarter to one-third sand in bagged, lightweight potting soil.

"I use regular play sand because it's cheaper and it does the same thing," McVicker said. "It works by creating more air-space for the cactus or succulent roots."

Next, he places two upright types of aloe, and another upright plant with green and red



leaves for contrasting texture, then adds stems and leaves of a blue-green rosette-style succulent to drape out of the pot.

"For some of them it helps to have a root ball but this kind will have roots within a couple of weeks," he said, referring to the sprawling rosettes. "For most succulents, you need two of the three parts - some root with stem, or a leaf with some stem, and that's all you need to grow more plants."

He finishes them off with pieces of broken pottery or stones with a repeating color palette, and spoons on a mixture of sand with a very small amount of Portland cement mixed in to keep the arrangement intact but still allowing water to percolate through.

Succulents planted in containers without drainage holes might look nice for a very short time, but drainage holes for proper watering is crucial for long lasting dish gardens.

"It should be watered heavily once a month or so, and only when they are totally dry and



Photo by Judith Brown

DISH GARDEN — To give enough space for the planted succulents to grow, Mark McVicker of Clinton uses only about three to four succulent plants in a standard dish garden, and finishes them with colored pottery chips, shells or stones. Full waterings should take place only once a month or so.

the pot is lightweight," McVicker said.

He uses a system of heavy watering twice while the water runs through, then adds water one more time. That very infrequent watering system, only when it's dry, is necessary to

help the sand and potting mix absorb the water. Then repeat only when completely dry again.

Within a year, he said, the plants will be mature enough to make simple divisions of stems and leaves to share with others.

An easy spring guide to a green, weed-free lawn

The rich green color, the soft feel beneath your feet and the iconic fresh-cut smell — thriving grass enhances your property in countless ways. Spring is the ideal time to focus on your lawn, so by taking steps now, you can enjoy lush, green grass for many months to come.

These four areas will help you focus your efforts where they will make the biggest impact.

Equipment Preparation

The lawn mower is your go-to piece of equipment. If it's gas-powered, make sure fuel hasn't gone bad by starting it up and letting it run for a while. Add fresh fuel as needed. Additionally, consider bringing your mower in for a tuneup. For a modest fee, a trained mechanic will go over all the mower components and make sure everything is in tip-top shape, including blade sharpening so your mower can cut efficiently.

Lawn trimmers are another popular tool for maintaining a yard. Again, start this piece of equipment up and see how well it runs. Add fresh line to the trimmer head so you get a clean cut. Finally, gather all other lawn-care tools and designate a convenient spot for easy access.

Mowing Advice

A great-looking, weed-free lawn requires proper mowing. Experts agree you should mow as soon as the grass starts to grow to remove any brown tips and encourage healthy growth.

Keep the grass mowed to 3-4 inches tall. At that height, grass shades out weeds, develops deeper roots and cools the soil. Some grasses — such as Kentucky bluegrass, fescues and perennial ryegrass — grow faster in cool weather. That means you mow more frequently in spring and early summer to keep it in the 3-4 inch range, and less frequently in mid to late summer and into fall.

Want an insider tip to a great lawn? Leave clippings on the grass. As they break down, they return

important trace nutrients to the soil. If the grass is tall when mowed, spread out any large, heavy clumps so the clippings don't smother the lawn.

Essential Treatments

Seek out combination lawn-care products to get better results with less work. For example, just one application of Preen One Lawn-care provides three treatments, so you save time while laying the foundation for a thick, green, weed-free lawn.

First, the application prevents crabgrass seeds from sprouting and — unlike traditional weed and feed products — also kills crabgrass seedlings up to four weeks after germination. Second, it kills dandelions plus 250 types of tough broadleaf lawn weeds on contact, down to the roots. Finally, it feeds the lawn continuously with a slow-release 20-0-6 formula that promotes even greening and strong roots for maximum heat and drought resistance.

Learn more at <https://one.preen.com>

Watering Guidelines

The morning is the best time to water grass. Temperatures and winds are typically lower in the morning, which means less evaporation. Strive to water grass before 10 a.m., but if you must do so later, wait until after 4 p.m., when the sun is less intense.

How do you know the amount of water your lawn is getting? Invest in a rain gauge to monitor precipitation. When using a sprinkler, set out a few empty tin cans in different places to measure water application. Unsure if you need to water? Try the footprinting test. Walk across your lawn and if your footprints are still visible after 30 seconds, it's time to water. Healthy, well-watered grass will stand back up quickly after you walk on it.

Set the stage for great grass this spring with these four easy tasks. A little effort now will ensure a lush lawn through summer and beyond.

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