



A tuft of black mondo grass in a sea of *Echeveria elegans*.

STRIKING SUCCULENTS

Though on the tender side, these dramatic plants move easily from the outdoors in, allowing gardeners across the country to enjoy a tropical look year-round.

BY GARY LEWIS



Utah agave (*Agave utahensis*) has prominent spines along the edges of its narrow leaves.



SUCCULENTS ARE OFTEN THOUGHT OF AS TENDER TROPICAL PLANTS FOR A SUNNY WINDOWSILL—rarely are they top of mind when it comes to outdoor garden design in Canada. Yet many of them, such as upright and ground-covering stonecrops, hen and chicks, saxifrages, hardy cacti, sea hollies and yuccas, can be grown outdoors throughout the year. While these hardy succulents are great for Zone 5 and below, it's the Zone 6 and above succulents that are more likely to inspire lust in the hearts of gardeners everywhere. With their dramatic foliage and bold structure, these more tender succulents, such as agaves and hardy bromeliads, offer much more botanical intrigue and excitement.

Though they won't survive outdoors in Canada's colder zones, they're easy to grow outdoors in the summer and make beautiful houseplants or sunroom specimens in the winter. With a short journey from the summer garden to the protected indoors, these stunning sun-loving, drought-tolerant succulents can be grown and enjoyed by gardeners across Canada year-round.

CENTURY PLANTS

Members of the diverse genus *Agave*, commonly called century plants, are renowned as the source of tequila and mescal. They enjoy ample water during the growing season, but need good winter drainage. Position on an angle or plant on a slope to prevent water collecting among their leaves to aid drainage in winter. Here are a few of the best.

◎ **Squid agave (*Agave bracteosa* 'Calamar')** Looking more marine-like than plant-like, with long, narrow, spineless, apple-green leaves, 'Calamar' festoons sheer cliffs in its native habitat. It's quite tolerant of winter wet, making it a good option for the West Coast; Zone 7.

◎ ***A. montana* 'Baccarat'** Hailing from winter-moist mountainsides at high elevations in northeast Mexico, *A. montana* commonly experiences mist, rain, frost and snow in the winter months. It has broad, glaucous leaves, each ending in a large black spine. The stunning silvery bud imprints on the leaves are reminiscent of cut crystal and inspired the cultivar name 'Baccarat'; Zone 7.

◎ **Parry's agave (*A. parryi*)** One of the most widespread, hardy agave species, *A. parryi* has dramatic bluish-grey rosettes. Great forms are offered by botanical varieties *truncata* and *huachucensis*, and the cultivars 'J.C. Raulston', 'Lime Streak' and 'Cream Spike'; all hardy to Zone 6.

◎ **Utah agave (*A. utahensis*)** One of the hardiest century plants, as its name suggests, it hails from Utah as well as the neighbouring southwest states. It's a small plant featuring relatively narrow, bluish leaves with prominent spines; Zone 6.

◎ **Queen Victoria agave (*A. victoriae-reginae*)** Queen Victoria agave has thick, rigid, compact green leaves with dramatic white margins and markings across the surface. It's been described as looking like an arti-

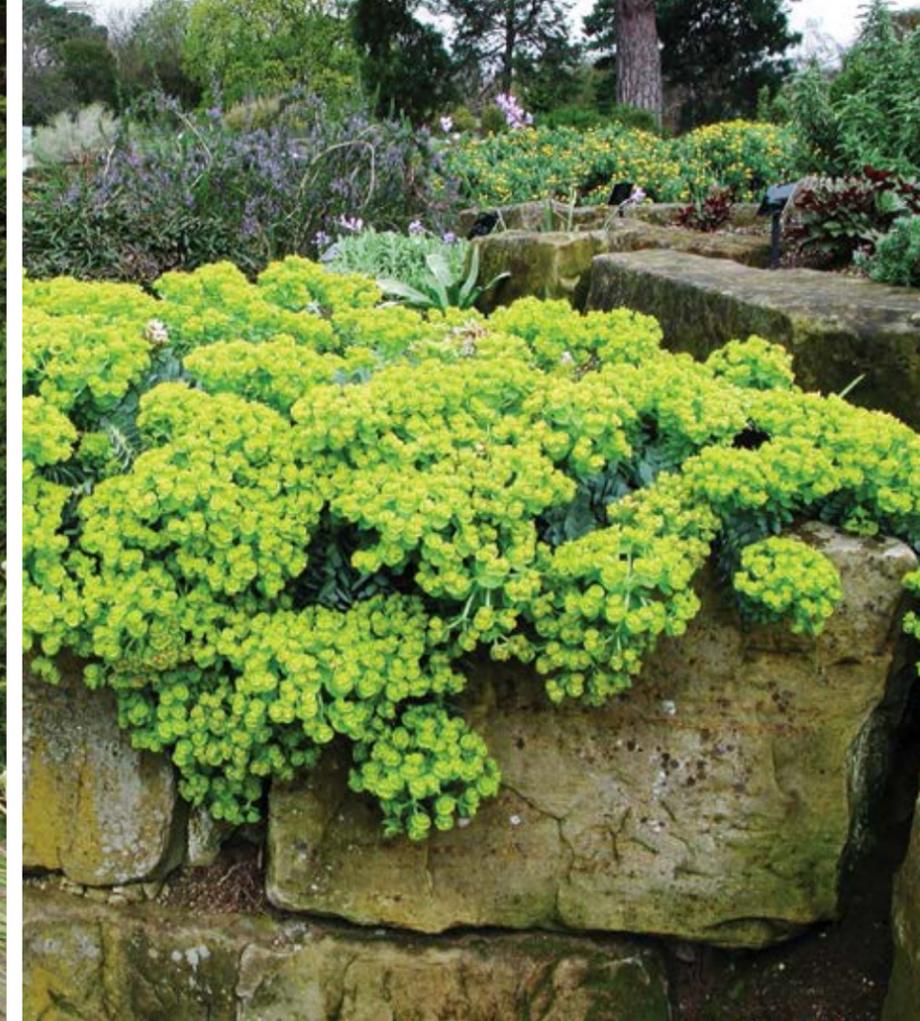
choke carved out of green stone. The cultivar 'Porcupine' forms tight, symmetrical rosettes; Zone 7.

Overwintering: Where hardy, these need only to be protected from wet winter conditions. Plant under the eaves of the house or in sharp drainage that includes generous amounts of gravel or chicken grit. If planted in the open garden, consider erecting a small roof overtop the plants to shed rainfall in the winter. A fold-up table, an old window or a piece of plywood raised up on cinder blocks to allow in light works well.

Where not hardy, century plants make excellent container specimens and are extremely tolerant of being moved indoors over winter. Place plants in a bright south-, east- or west-facing window. Water sparingly every three to four weeks to avoid encouraging new growth. In spring, once outdoor nighttime temperatures are above 10°C, move plants outdoors into a shaded spot and gradually acclimatize them to more light by introducing them to morning and evening sun for a few days, then full light on a cloudy day and eventually to a full-sun location for the rest of the summer. This hardening off is best done over a two-week period to avoid burning the foliage. Feed with a slow-release balanced fertilizer once plants are outdoors.

SOUTHERN SEA HOLLIES

Less hardy than their cousins from the northern hemisphere, such as *Eryngium planum* and *E. yuccifolium*, these South American sea hollies make dramatic specimens.



◎ **Agave-leaf sea holly (*E. agavifolium*)** This distinctive species has long, serrated, apple-green leaves rising from a central rosette, resembling a century plant. In summer, the rosette produces a stem two to four feet (60 to 120 cm) tall with clusters of egg-shaped inflorescences of white flowers. The flowering stems turn dark brown with age and provide good winter interest; Zone 6.

◎ **Candelabra sea holly (*E. eburneum*)** Plants form a large, striking rosette of glossy, prickly, evergreen, serrated leaves. The clump is topped with an intriguing three- to six-foot (90- to 180-cm)-tall, branched inflorescence of white-and-green flowers; Zone 7.

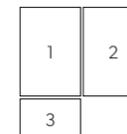
Overwintering: Where hardy, site in a sunny location in a raised bed with good drainage. Where not hardy, these sea hollies may or may not be amenable to indoor room temperature conditions, but it's always worth a shot! However, they would likely be successful overwintering in a slightly heated greenhouse or a cool sunroom.

HARDY SPURGES

The diverse euphorbia family includes crown of thorns, poinsettias and a number of good garden plants, some of which contribute a great succulent look.

◎ **Donkey tail spurge (*Euphorbia myrsinites*)** This spurge has mounding floppy stems with powder-blue, semi-succulent, evergreen leaves arranged in close spirals around the stems. It's stunning in spring, when it blooms with showy yellow bracts; Zone 5.

◎ ***E. rigida*** This species is similar to the more common donkey tail spurge, but with more pointed foliage and more upright stems that may



1. Candelabra sea holly (*Eryngium eburneum*); 2. Donkey tail spurge (*Euphorbia myrsinites*); 3. Queen Victoria agave (*Agave victoriae-reginae*).

Photos: Gary Lewis

Tip

To avoid burning the foliage of century plants that have overwintered indoors, acclimatize them to full sun over a two-week period.



Desert spoon (*Dasylirion wheeleri*)



Sun bromeliad (*Fascicularia bicolor*)



Yucca recurvifolia



Parry's agave (*Agave parryi*)



eventually trail. Like its cousin, it has great powder-blue foliage and bright electric-green flowers; Zone 7.

Overwintering: Where hardy, these low-growing spurges are content in full sun in average to dry garden soils. Where not hardy, they're happy in a cool sunroom or greenhouse and may even survive in the house on a sunny, cool windowsill.

HARDY PINEAPPLES

Although the bromeliad family offers us mainly tropical houseplants, plus the beloved pineapple, there are a few hardier members that make dramatic specimens for the patio or garden.

© *Dyckia* 'Burgundy Ice' (Zone 7) and 'Grape Jelly', 'Nickel Silver', 'Sawtooth', 'San Juan' (Zone 8) Dyckias are the most cold tolerant of the bromeliad family. They form rosettes of long, hard, succulent leaves in shades of burgundy or silver, often with ferocious white teeth that make for a dramatic display. They are drought tolerant, but thrive on frequent watering during the active growing season.

© **Sun bromeliad (*Fascicularia bicolor*)** This epiphytic member of the pineapple family hails from Chile and is likely harder than current thinking. It forms a congested rosette of long, narrow silver foliage. When it blooms, the leaf bases near the centre of the plant turn bright red around a cluster of sky-blue flowers. Grow in a pot, in a hanging basket or as an epiphyte on the trunk of a windmill palm. Hardy to Zone 8 or possibly lower.

Overwintering: Where hardy, both *Dyckia* and *Fascicularia* may

weather the winter better if planted in drier locations out of the rain, such as under the overhang of the house or where evergreen shrubs or trees will shed winter rainfall.

Where not hardy, these intriguing bromeliads would make easy houseplants. Place in a bright windowsill or put them in a hanging basket to keep them up and away, so you don't bump into their serrated teeth when vacuuming. In spring, harden them off for the move outdoors as described for century plants.

YUCCAS FOR Milder CLIMATES

The hardiest yucca is **Adam's needle (*Yucca filamentosa*)**, Zone 4, followed by the powder blue *Y. rostrata* 'Sapphire Skies', Zone 5. Here are two more for adventurous gardeners to consider.

© **Banana yucca (*Y. baccata*)** Banana yucca is widespread across the southwest deserts in the U.S. and in northern Mexico. The common name refers to the shape of the four- to six-inch (10- to 15-cm)-long edible fruit. Its thick, bluish, slightly arching leaves are less numerous than

those on other yucca species. Short candelabras of creamy white flowers in summer; Zone 7.

© **Soft-leaf yucca (*Y. recurvifolia*)** Native to the southeastern U.S., this species will eventually develop into a large-trunked plant up to six feet (1.8 m) tall. The foliage is blue-green with a soft, graceful arch that gives the plant a distinctive look. Tall candelabra spikes of creamy white flowers top mature plants in midsummer; Zone 6.

Overwintering: Where hardy, these yucca need only reasonable drainage in sun to part sun. Where not hardy, they make easy greenhouse plants. Their mature size may make them difficult to overwinter in the house or sunroom, but if you do have space indoors, they would likely be tolerant of indoor winter conditions.

MORE SUCCULENT DRAMA

© **Spiral aloe (*Aloe polyphylla*)** This stunning endangered aloe is from the mountains of Lesotho (the mountain kingdom surrounded by South Africa). It features light green leaves arranged in a spiral that becomes more and more pronounced as the plant matures. In its native habitat, it experiences winter frosts and snow, and cool summers with ample moisture; Zone 7.

Overwintering: Where hardy, spiral aloe must be protected from excessive winter moisture and humidity in the air. Sharp drainage and a location out of the rain are essential. Where not hardy, spiral aloe would make an easy houseplant. In spring, harden it off for the move outdoors as described for century plants.

© **Desert spoon (*Dasylirion wheeleri*)** Desert spoon has long, narrow bluish-green leaves that radiate in all directions to form a dramatic succulent sphere. Though slow growing, it can form a trunk with time. The 10- to 15-foot (3 to 5 m)-tall flowering stem towers over mature plants with white flowers on male plants and purple-pink flowers on females; Zone 8.

© **Mexican grass trees (*D. quadrangulatum* and *D. longissimum*)** Mexican grass trees are two similar plants, sometimes referred to as the same species, that grow into spectacular specimens with foot-wide (30-cm) trunks and large spheres of long, stiff, square-edged bluish-green leaves without spines. As young plants, they form a dramatic mound of foliage; Zone 8.



Broadleaf poker (*Kniphofia northiae*)

Overwintering: Hardiness is improved with protection from winter rain that could collect in the central rosettes. Good soil drainage is also important. Where not hardy, these *Dasylirion* species make easy greenhouse or sunroom plants. Although slow growing, they might eventually outgrow the average house, especially since desert spoon has some pretty surprising serrated edges.

☉ **Mexican snowball (*Echeveria elegans*)** An apt name for two reasons: the succulent rosettes are an icy blue colour and this species is the hardiest of the *Echeveria*, a genus whose members are mostly hardy to Zone 9, and are incredibly diverse and highly collectible. Beware their allure lest you end up with a collection that might overwhelm. (Your humble author speaks from experience!) Zone 8.

Overwintering: Mexican snowball can be grown successfully outdoors in winter where hardy if protected from rain and kept bone dry. It also makes an easy houseplant if kept in your coolest, brightest room with minimal water. When watered too much or kept warm, the plants can stretch and become unsightly.

☉ **Broadleaf poker (*Kniphofia northiae*)** This bold, exotic, evergreen red-hot poker has broad, semi-succulent, architectural apple-green foliage that resembles a yucca or soft-leaved agave. A late-spring to early-summer bloomer, broadleaf poker has thick spikes with huge cones of fiery flowers, up to three feet (90 cm) tall. It blooms at the same time as bearded iris and 'Globemaster' allium; Zone 7.

Overwintering: Where hardy, broadleaf poker is easy to grow in average soil and is tolerant of more winter wet than other succulents. Although I've not overwintered this indoors, it should survive in a pot in a greenhouse or sunroom with cool temperatures and bright light.

FOR SOURCES, SEE PAGE 61.



Designing with succulents

Of all the species of succulents available to Canadian gardeners, those hardy in Zones 6 to 8 offer the most intriguing and architectural forms. Where they can be planted outdoors permanently, these more tender succulents can provide a visual starting point for further exploration of your garden's finer details. They make good focal points placed at strategic locations, especially at the end of sightlines or in borders lacking in structure and drama.

If you garden where most succulents need to be overwintered indoors, they can still contribute greatly to the garden. When grown in pots, these dramatic plants can be placed around the garden to wonderful effect. Since they're mobile, they can also be moved around to fill spaces in the border when perennials are trimmed back or where new plantings have yet to grow in.

Succulents look great with many perennial companions, including grasses and sedges, black mondo grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens'), New Zealand flax (*Phormium* spp. and cvs.), heucheras, the sun-loving *Helleborus foetidus* and *H. argutifolius*, woolly thymes, bugleweeds (*Ajuga* spp. and cvs.) and bergenia.

Several potted specimens also look terrific grouped together on the patio. Once you get one or two, you'll likely want many more!

