Strange Succulents Accent Desert Landscapes

By Laura Murphy, Mohave County Master Gardener

If you're looking for some unusual plants to accent your desert landscape, try some strange selections from the sometimes bazaar world of succulents. Here are some of my favorites:

Devil’s Backbone (Pedilanthus macorcarpus) has thick, leafless lime-green stems that twist and contort giving the plant a bazaar shape. Plants grow in an upright cluster of multi-branching stems, topped in the spring by attractive slipper-shaped pink flowers. As a member of the Euphorbia family, Devil’s Backbone stems bleed milky sap when broken that can be a skin irritant.

Devil’s Backbone is an accent plant ideal for containers or when planted with cactus and other desert landscape plants. It grows best in full sun and is extremely heat and drought tolerant. It needs little or no supplemental irrigation after becoming established in landscapes. In a container, this plant requires well-drained soil and weekly watering during the heat of summer. In the winter cover with a frost blanket on cold nights when temperatures fall below 26 degrees F.
is actually an unusual genetic variation of our common Senita Cactus (Lophocereus schottii). Unlike the typically vertically ribbed and thorned Senita, Candle Wax cactus has a smooth surface dotted with knobby protrusions along the length of its columnar form. This lumpy form gives the cactus an appearance reminiscent of ‘candle wax’, thus the plant’s common name.

Candle Wax is native to the Baja Peninsula where they form 15 foot high branched columnar clusters. Specimen plants grown in Tucson are more typically 6 to 10 feet tall. They make exceptional landscape or container plants. Over time, single columns will branch and form additional upright arms. Growing tips can be injured below 25 degrees F., but are easily protected with cold caps - Styrofoam cups placed over the column tops.

Mother of Thousands (Kalanchoe daigremontianum)

is an odd succulent with hundreds, if not thousands, of tiny plant-lets sprouting from thick boat-shaped leaves. Dark blotches on the underside of leaves give the plant an unusual purple-tinged appearance. Plant-lets sprout from the leaf edges in the spring and drop from the plant in the fall and will root if they contact moist soil. In addition to the unusual sprouting plant-lets, Mother of Thousands have striking pink bell-shaped clusters of pendulous flowers produced on three foot long stalks in early spring.

Mother of Thousands grows best in light to medium shade, in well-drained soils. It’s ideal of container culture, where it can be moved to protected locations during winter cold snaps. Plants are frost sensitive.
Brain Cactus (Echinofossulocactus multicostatus) comes by its name because of the unusual wavy pattern to the outer ribs. Because the undulating ribs on this small, spherical cactus are so numerous (up to 100) and so closely spaced most of what you see is the wavy brain-like surface of the plant.

Because of its small size, only 6 inches fall and wide, Brain Cactus makes a great potted plant specimen. Or you can plant it in clusters near taller growing cacti and succulent species. Unlike the previous cactus mentioned, Brain Cactus is tolerant of, and prefers light shade during the hot summer months. It is cold hardy to 25 degrees F., and as with all the cactus mentioned, watering should be curtailed during the winter months.

Other strange and interesting succulents to try include; Burro’s Tail Sedum, Living Stones, Starfish Flower, Grandfather Cactus and the Boojum Tree.

For more information contact The University of Arizona Mohave County Cooperative Extension at 101 E. Beale Street, Suite A, Kingman or telephone 928-753-3788.