

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Succulent of the Month January 2003 - *Pelargonium* and *Sarcocaulon*

Pelargonium and *Sarcocaulon* are two succulent genera of the *Geraniaceae* family. *Sarcocaulon* is native to South Africa and Namibia, and *Pelargonium* is centered there, but with outlier species appear as far away as Kenya and Yemen. Almost all the succulent species come from South Africa or Namibia.



Pelargonium gibbosum

Pelargoniums are mostly winter growing succulents. They are dormant in the summer, and at this time some look like dead sticks. Most species are very easy to grow, if attention is paid to providing an environment very similar to their South African home. Some species, such as *P. echinatum* and *P. triste* are tolerant enough to be naturalized in the ground in Southern California when given good drainage and protected from summer watering. Many species will not go dormant if watered all summer, but the plant health and appearance both suffer.

Sarcocaulon is a small genus of about 14 species. Growing conditions for *Sarcocaulon* are identical to those for *Pelargonium*, however most require a drier summer environment for best growth.

The potting mix for *Pelargoniums* and *Sarcocaulon* should be well drained, with only small amounts of organic matter. Fertilizer should be applied sparingly, and only during good

(bright and warm) growing weather. A potting mix recommended by Michael Vassar is 50% pumice, 35% washed builders sand and 15% leaf mold based planter mix. Plants growing under these conditions will stay compact, have thick leaves, and a healthy appearance. A well grown *Pelargonium* will have leaves that appear to float near thick, rugged stems. If given too much water and fertilizer, they will grow leggy, and the leaves will become soft, large and droop. Plants grown hard will be healthier, and better able to survive hot summers undamaged. All *Pelargoniums* need pruning to maintain size and shape. Pinching new growth will make the plants bushy, and develop good trunk structure.

Many are self fertile, and seed is easily collected after flowering. Most are promiscuous, and garden hybrids are easily set if more than one species is in flower at a time. Seed collected in the spring and planted in late September to November germinates quickly, and will have an entire winter to grow before going dormant during the summer.

Particularly Pleasant Pelargoniums:

Pelargonium alternans gets thick grey-green branched stems quickly. The leaves are scented, with the scent varying from clone to clone, varying from apple to soap to various indescribable and unpleasant odors. The oils that give the scent keep most grazing animals from eating the leaves.

Pelargonium auritum v. carneum is a geophytic species, disappearing entirely when dormant.

Pelargonium crithmifolium is a species that gets fat and shrubby. It's a fast grower.

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Pelargonium echinatum

Pelargonium echinatum has leaves that look like and are scented like the common *geranium*. It has small flowers that rise above the leaves on a long branched peduncle. Flower colors vary from white to purple, with dark centers and appear over several months.

Pelargonium carnosum is a sparsely leafed caudiciform species. Easy to grow.

Pelargonium laxum has a leaves similar in appearance to carrot leaves. During active growth they are a dark green, with a narrow white edge that glows in early morning and evening light.

Pelargonium tabulare, another with *Geranium* like leaves has ascent closer to grass than geraniums.

Pelargonium tetragonum has stems with a square cross section with visible segments. They need to be pruned to avoid drooping. Flowers are large, white to pink and appear in late winter. The leaves are small and have reddish brown margins.



Pelargonium laxum

Pelargonium xerophytum is a stem succulent, with thinner stems than the caudiciform types described above. The leaves stay close to the stem. It makes a nice bonsai even as a young plant.

References

J. J. A. van der Walt, **Pelargoniums of Southern Africa (3 vols.)**

M. Vassar, **Geraniaceae in SGVCSS Communique Nov 1995**

D. Miller, **Pelargoniums**