



## Practical Tips Cactus Garden Basics



**SITE** Cacti prefer a south or west facing site; gentle slopes are great for drainage. Most cacti need 6 – 8 hours of sun daily. Some will also appreciate a bit of shade from grasses or xeric plants such as fringed sage.

**SOIL** Cacti are very adaptable, but heavy clay is not usually recommended. The most important characteristic of a good cactus soil is permeability. The SFEMG [cactus demonstration garden](#) at the Santa Fe County Fairgrounds is planted in a mix of native soil and base course (yes, the material driveways are made of). A typical recipe was given in the Colorado Cactus & Succulent Society's *Growing Cacti and Succulents*<sup>1</sup>(1996). They suggested 1/3 native soil, 1/3 rock waste, 1/3 coarse sand. The local [Cactus Rescue Project](#) mixes arroyo sand with the native soil and adds rock in a variety of sizes for interest, warmth, and moisture collection.

**MULCH** Quarter inch pea gravel or scoria (red lava rock) spread at a depth of 2” will help disperse rainwater and warm the soil. Many xeric perennials thrive in the same environment as cacti and will reseed readily in pea gravel.

**MAINTENANCE** Water infrequently. Many cacti require no supplemental watering, but a shallow watering in late spring will encourage new growth. They don't need it, but if you feel you must, use a mild fertilizer (such as liquid kelp) at half strength. Do not water after the first of August; plants dehydrate going into winter to avoid cold damage. They appear to shrivel and wrinkle, and some will shrink back to soil level to protect themselves. Weeding is a challenge; try using a long-handled weeder to avoid damage to yourself and your plants. Handle cuttings with salad tongs.

**PROPAGATION** *Opuntia* spp. and *Cylindropuntia* spp. are most easily propagated from cuttings. That is, a pad or joint will root from the areoles. Make a clean cut and let the wound callous over for a week or so before planting with about a third of the cutting below ground. Other genera of cacti can be grown easily from seed; some require cold stratification or scarification.

Visit the Santa Fe Extension Master Gardeners website [sfemg.org](http://sfemg.org) for more information about gardening in Northern New Mexico, and the SNaPP project page to access the [SNaPP Guide to Native Plants](#). Chapter 2 lists cacti native to New Mexico<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Out of print. Cactus enthusiasts' recommendations run the gamut of “plant in pure sand” to “plant in clay” but all will emphasize the importance of good drainage.

<sup>2</sup>*Flora Neomexicana III: An Illustrated Identification Manual*, 2nd ed. Kelly W. Allred, Eugene M. Jercinovic. Illustrated by Robert DeWitt Ivey. LuLu, 2020