

Aloe

Aloe – the medicinal plant from heaven – is easy to grow, even in our challenging environment. According to some sources, it's been in human cultivation for five thousand years. For five thousand years it's been a treatment for burns, blisters, and boo-boos. The plant most of us think of is *Aloe vera*, or *Aloe barbiensis*.

It might look like agave or yucca, but they are hardly related. Yucca and agave are cousins that evolved in the great American Southwest. Aloe was brought from Africa.

Since the intrepid desert horticulturist succeeds in this climate, and because aloe appears like other succulent desert rosettes, it fits into a dryland garden beautifully. It produces spikes of red flowers that attract to hummingbirds, and you can plant it even during hot weather! Many other trees and shrubs suffer when placed directly into hot soil.

Because growing it is so simple, why not plant some? It does not need terribly fertile soil, but benefits from some soil improvement. Many informational websites say not to fertilize aloe. They are not dealing with Southern Nevada conditions. Adding some compost will give the plant a better chance for survival.

The ground must be well drained. Probably the biggest reason **any** landscape plant dies **is not** fertility, wind, or lack of water. The worst culprit is a **lack of drainage**. When roots sit in a muddy hole, they stop pulling up water. They become susceptible to nasty microbes that thrive in poorly drained situations.

The first thing to do after selecting a site is to check the drainage. An easy way is simply to plunge a long bladed screwdriver (at least eight inches) into the soil.

You should be able to drive it down to a six inch depth. If you hit a barrier, you can select another location or break up the hardpan and removing whatever rocks you can. Then dig the hole and pour water into it. The water must be drained away by the next day, at the latest.

Once the site is prepared, you can plant. While many other succulents propagate reasonably well using a section of leaf, usually aloe grows better when it is started from a small whole plant. Once established in the ground, it produces offsets, new plants from the roots.

Water deeply and infrequently. As a reference, give more than you would give a cactus, and less than you would give a Texas Ranger.

It is not **all** easy – winter can be tough on aloe. Some resources say only plant in zones 9 and 10. We are zone 9a, but nevertheless, we occasionally see frost damage. When temperatures drop into the 20's, parts of the plants will die, and when they die, they turn into mush. Do not despair; that is not the end of the world. Pull out the dead parts at the center – not the whole plant – and the remaining viable parts should again put out shoots when the weather warms. This will provide you with more plants from nature's pharmacy.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for Clark County Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.



Aloe Plant found at the
Demonstration Gardens at the
Lifelong Learning Center