

Aloe vera



Aloe vera, aka *Aloe bardadensis*, is definitely a popular plant, and for good reason. Its gel is included in burn remedies and in general use skin products. People who have it growing in their gardens or indoors in pots will reach for it when immediate first aid is needed on the skin. Not all research agrees that it is invariably beneficial and effective, and there is some concern about it when taken internally. Still, this succulent has been recommended medicinally

since the 16th century BC. For more than a thousand years before that, it was considered a plant of immortality and included in burial rites. It is so widely grown now that there is a question as to its area of origin – probably somewhere in Arabia or northern Africa. Several species of aloe are available, but *A. vera* is usually the one that considered medicinal.

It grows in the form of rosettes, looking somewhat like a smaller agave with significantly fleshier leaves, but these two species are not related. Agaves only flower once and then die, but aloe is perennial, and will bloom as long as it is in reasonably good health. Its flowers, attractive to hummingbirds, are similar to those of the perennial red yucca (*Hesperaloe parviflora*), which is also not a relation. In fact, red yucca is more closely related to agave.

This plant is so easy to grow in our part of the world that one friend recently said she has started calling it a weed because it has so few natural enemies and it produces so many pups around the base. Obviously this was an exaggeration, but it will stand up to some rough treatment. The pups can be dug up and placed around the garden or in pots.



Whether it is planted in the ground or indoors in pots, it does have a few requirements. This plant requires bright light, good drainage and occasional watering. In fact, it can be allowed to become dry between waterings.

Planting aloe in the ground is not difficult. Its roots should be well covered with slightly amended soil and watered in to remove any big air pockets. As long as it is placed in soil with good drainage and a modicum of fertility, it can thrive through heat and drought. High temperatures and lack of rainfall are common features of the Mojave Desert, but this area has more variety than simply being hot and dry. Our average winter low is just above freezing, but in some years it can be significantly colder. This plant is not something that tolerates flooding, nor much chilling. After a hard Mojave winter, there are usually dead, rather mushy, rosettes in the centers of many of the largest aloe vera plants in gardens and yards. This can be disheartening to the intrepid desert gardener, but there is no need to despair. Remove the dead growth after the cold temperatures are past. As long as the plant has a well-established root system, it will produce new shoots when the weather is more congenial.

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