

Don't let their rough exteriors fool you; like all plants, succulents can put on quite a show. To our Low Country eyes — accustomed to southern live oaks draped with Spanish moss, spikey palmettos and lush, leafy gardens — succulents may appear exotic, yet many are native to the region. With increasingly busy schedules (and hotter and drier summers, it seems) there could hardly be an easier group of plants to grow in the gardens.

Many plants grow along the coast, but sea oats aren't the only plants known for their resiliency and durability. Adding stability and beauty to the dunes, Spanish bayonets (*Yucca aloifolia*) thrive despite heat, dryness, salt and sandy soil. All succulents are survivors; in fact, they have to be. Their native lands are places of hot sun, searing summer heat and little water from the heavens. They are tough out of necessity.



*Prickly pear grows in the
sand by Jack Parker Blvd.*

SEASIDE succulents

by JEFF MINNICH
photography by ALLISON POTTER

yucca

yuccas

Yuccas are a wonderful group of plants for the coastal zone 8 climate. Some say yuccas aren't true succulents (there are exceptions in many of these groups), yet they can survive without water for long periods of time. They have stiff, almost grass-like foliage. All are green year 'round and all have magnificent, waxy, white flower spikes in the summer when not many other plants are blooming. Their blooms can be surprisingly fragrant.

The most prominent of the local yuccas are the Spanish bayonets, which are practically indestructible. The stems grow in clumps and reach heights over 10 feet. If you want security, this plant says, "Don't walk through me!". I once dug up a few clumps from a friend's Wilmington yard and ended up with multiple cuts to my arms and legs by the time I finished the job. This plant has my respect.

Other useful yuccas include Adam's needle (*Yucca filamentosa*). Look for the 'filaments' shedding off the edges of the leaves, a great identifier. The plant grows two to three feet tall and the flower stalk shoots up many feet beyond the leaves. The *Yucca recurvifolia*, the curve-leaf yucca, has leaves that curve and hang downward from the stem and grows to six feet or more.

All yuccas have a coarse, striking texture, yet one of the loveliest to work into a landscape bed is the mound-lily yucca, (*Yucca gloriosa*). It has a uniform shape, and scattering several around the landscape adds bold interest.

Finally, the beaked yucca (*Yucca rostrata*) could pass for a palm. It's tall, rising 15 feet or more, has a thick, straight trunk, and finely cut, bluish leaves crowning the stem. A beauty.

Spanish bayonet overlooks Banks Channel from the South Channel Drive mini park. Bottom, left to right: Moundlily yucca, Spanish bayonet seed pods, beaked yucca.



red yuccas

Not really yuccas, red yuccas have the same form and shape, but they have a finer texture and thinner leaves than the true yuccas. The red yucca, (*Hesperaloe parviflora*), is the smaller of the two types most prominent in the Wrightsville Beach area. The plant grows about three feet tall and five feet in diameter and, like the yucca, the flower stalk shoots several feet above the leaves. The flowers are a lovely coral-red, occasionally yellow.

The giant Hesperaloe (*Hesperaloe funifera*) is another of those wow plants like the century plant. It grows about six feet tall and wide, and the flower stalk can grow 15 feet. The flowers are creamy white.

Right: Century plants off North Lumina Ave.
Below: Giant hesperaloe at Cordgrass Bay.



agaves

Agave Americana, the massive, blue-leaved succulent is the century plant. The legend is that they grow a hundred years, bloom and then die. The bloom-then-die part is true, but when they actually decide to bloom varies. Talk about a show. The massive flower spikes can shoot up 20 to 40 feet and they are truly magnificent.

Tony Avent, well-known plantsman and owner of Plant Delights Nursery at Juniper Level Botanic Garden near Raleigh, favors *Agave ovatifolia* 'frosty blue,' commonly known as the whale's tongue hardy century plant.

"Hard to pick one succulent," says Tony, "but it's the first that comes to mind." It's a wonderful blue agave, and grows about three feet high by five feet wide. "It's truly one of the finest of the agaves and it's very winter hardy and loves the East Coast climate," he says.

Another showstopper is *Agave* sp. 'Mr. Ripple'. It's silvery-blue, grows about four feet high by six feet wide and has twisting, undulating leaves. Talk about movement in the garden!

Succulents Care

You'll need to water to help them root and establish themselves but after that the carefree succulents will do well on their own provided they are given well-drained soil and full sun — the hotter, the better. Occasional grooming is good — remove dead leaves and spent flower stalks. Fertilizer and insect and disease control is seldom needed.

Succulent Safety

Succulent leaves can have sharp points and edges, thorns, prickles and spines, all of which can cause injury. Avoid planting near walkways and seating areas. Succulents can provide security and block passage. Please use judiciously, and plant and handle with care.



Mr. Ripples at Shell Island Resort.



prickly pears

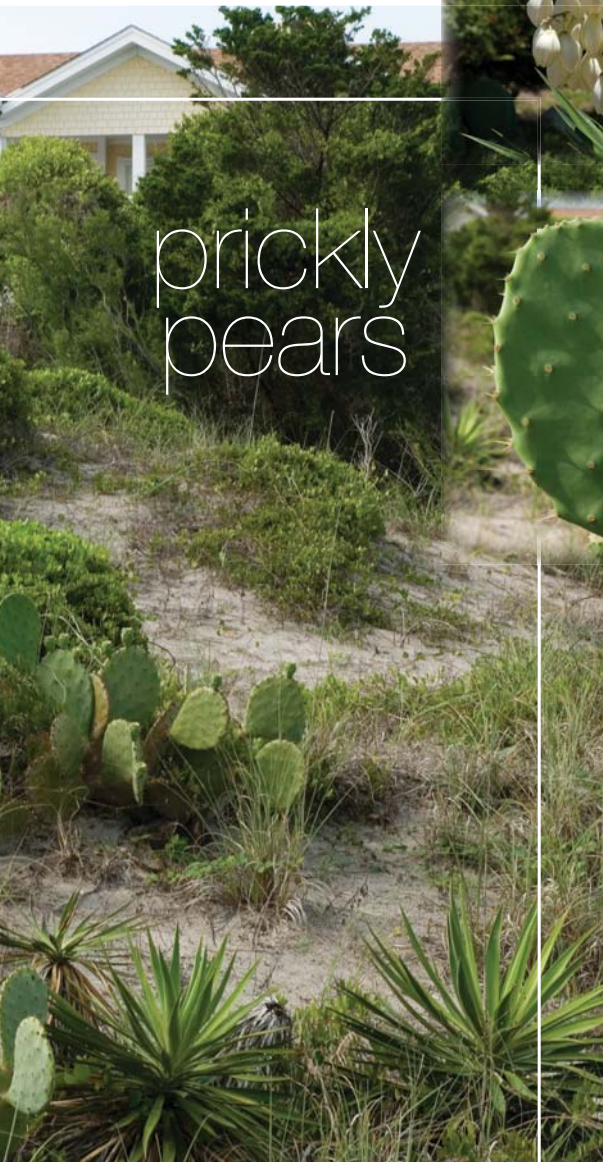
Many a gardener, experienced as well as unsuspecting, has spent frustrating hours trying to dig the impossible finely spun and practically invisible cactus hairs from the skin. The prickly pear makes its presence painfully known. Use caution when gardening with these lovely cacti. Pear-shaped pads grow one out of the other, layer by layer, as they expand into large clumps. Bright yellow flowers appear on the tips of the outermost pad in spring, followed by purplish-maroon fruit, called tuna. The fruit is edible and is eaten in many countries.

Two varieties of prickly pear are prominent in this area: the low hardy or Eastern prickly pear, *Opuntia humifusa*, and the taller erect prickly pear, *Opuntia stricta*. Like the Spanish bayonet yucca, the erect prickly pear can be seen growing on the dunes. The two together are quite striking.

*Below: Prickly pears and yucca at Wrightsville's South end.
Right: Spanish bayonet.*



prickly
pears



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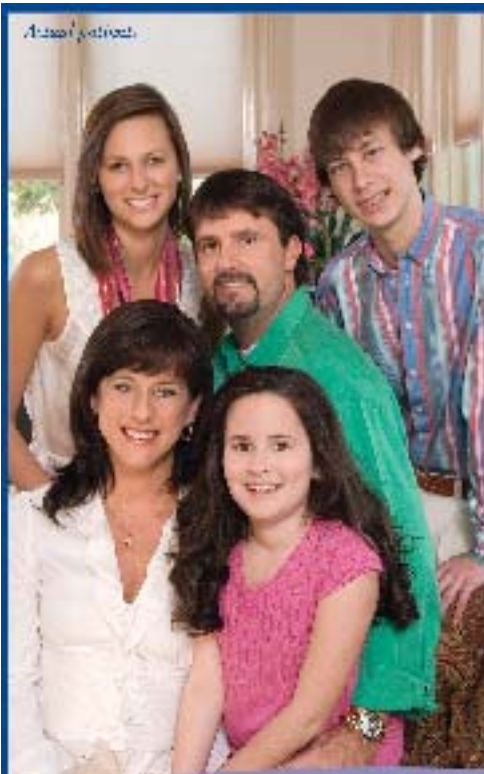


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sedums, echeverias ice plants



Sedums are great plants for easy care in mixed containers, both indoors and outdoors.

sedums, echeverias and ice plants

In this region, these smaller, fleshy-leaved groups of succulents are best used in the perennial garden or between stepping-stones as fillers. The larger types can be bushy; smaller types are spreading ground-huggers. The varieties are endless — flowers, leaf size and leaf colors vary greatly. There is one of these for every taste.

Charlotte Glen, North Carolina Horticulture Extension Agent, likes low-growing sedums. “I like *Sedum ‘Angelina’*, *Sedum ‘Coral Reef’*, and *Sedum ‘Weihenstephaner Gold’*,” she says. “I was first introduced to these a few years ago as part of a green roof project.”

Echeverias are a group of succulents that includes the beloved hens and chickens, or hens and chicks. Also small, they are great for growing in pots and very hardy, off-shooting much like strawberries and easy to propagate. Hens and chickens are a great plant to use when trying to engage children in gardening. Again, varieties abound.

Ice plants are fleshy, groundcover succulents. They don’t do quite as well in humid climates, though they do love sandy soil. A good stand of ice plant is a thing of beauty. The most common type, *Delosperma cooperi*, displays hot pink flowers all summer long. Very showy! ✨