

Starting an Outdoor Cactus Collection

Introduction

When many people think of cacti, they also think of hot, dusty deserts. Most wouldn't even consider growing them in their gardens. In reality, several species of cacti do well in our Canadian climate, and some species are native to Canada. Winter-hardy cacti make a great addition to any garden, especially rock or perennial gardens.

In summer, bright yellow, pink and red flowers bloom all season long. Once the flowers fade, attractive red fruits develop and last on the plant throughout the winter. Cacti are also a great way to keep pests such as deer, rabbits or cats out of a garden without seriously hurting them or using fences.

Species

The cacti best suited to survive a Canadian winter belong to the genus *Opuntia* and are commonly called prickly pear cactus. They have characteristic rounded or oval pads connected together and often have the most spectacular flowers of any cactus.

The species *Opuntia humifusa*, *Opuntia compressa*, *Opuntia macrorhiza*, *Opuntia polyacantha* and *Opuntia fragilis* are all native to Canada and are hardy to about Zone 4. With time, they will form a spreading colony up to 1 m wide and 20 cm high.

Opuntia phaeacantha and *Opuntia imbricata* are two species native to the southwest United States. Although less hardy (roughly to Zone 6), they are more upright than native species and can reach a height of 60 cm in good conditions.

Light

Cacti should always be planted in bright locations receiving full sun for at least six hours a day. Ideally, they should be planted against south-facing walls or rocks. This placement helps reflect extra light and heat onto the plants and creates a warm microclimate to protect them in winter. Cacti located in shady areas are susceptible to rotting and will rarely (if ever) produce flowers.

Water

Cacti are specially adapted for survival with little water. In fact, excess water is probably the worst enemy of a cactus. Cacti planted outdoors typically have deep taproots, allowing them to find moisture well below the surface. In Ontario, rainfall is often more than enough to keep a cactus happy.

Soil

Cacti will do best in a very sandy, well-drained soil. Extra gravel can help improve drainage and reduce the chances of rotting. Wood chips or compost placed in the planting hole is often enough to fertilize the new plants for several years.

Cacti are great plants for any garden. Their bright flowers help attract butterflies while their distinct appearance will grab anyone's attention, especially when they are growing outside in Canada. Best of all, they are very easy to take care of.

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