

CACTI ■ PLANTS FROM SEED

grow a SPINE

When the weather turns this hot and dry, it's time to practice tough love and to admire cacti as the showy survivors they are

Is your *Salvia leucantha* droopy and listless? Are your purple coneflowers getting crispy? Salvias and native flowers are supposed to be drought-tolerant. What's the deal? And what should a water-conscious gardener do? Consider these possibilities: Let some of your sad perennials die back and hope they return to a milder summer next year. Give your garden more afternoon shade and more mulch. Replace some of your needier plants with more agaves, ornamental grasses and cacti, which tolerate high heat and drought better than many salvias and flowers. To help you get started on a cactus garden, Sean Watson, nursery manager at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, put together this step-by-step how-to.

— Renee Studebaker

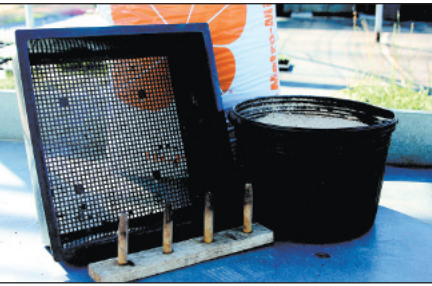
Recommended cacti for Central Texas

- *Coryphantha sulcata* (nipple cactus)
- *Echinocactus texensis* (horse cholla)
- *Echinocereus coccineus* (claret cup)
- *Echinocereus reichenbachii* (lace cactus)
- Most *Opuntia* species (prickly pears)



Vance Naumann

There are several species of prickly pear cactus, but you can recognize members of the genus *Opuntia* by their flat pads, bright flowers and edible fruit.



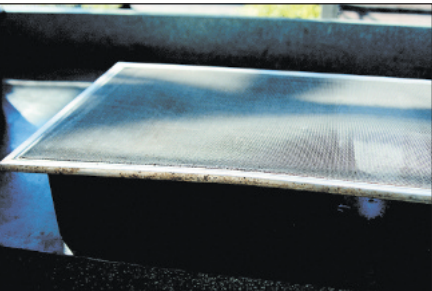
1. Find a sterile seed-starting mix and cut it with 25 percent limestone sand to increase drainage. Fill your container two-thirds full with your mix and water thoroughly.



2. Use a flat tool to tap down the surface so that it is smooth.



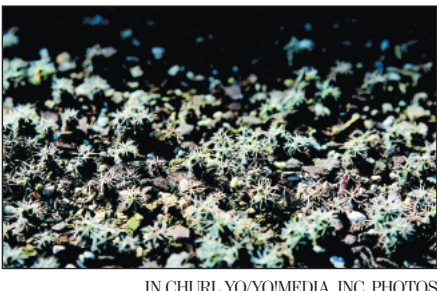
3. Sow cactus seed in spring/summer for best results. Sow evenly on the surface. Do not cover the seed (unless planting *Opuntia*).



4. Place the tray in partial shade so it is protected from afternoon sun. Use a misting nozzle to water in the cactus seeds after they are sown.



5. Keep soil moist by hand-misting or with a misting system. After germination begins, feed once a week with fertilizer. Keep seedlings moist until winter.



IN CHURL YO/OMEDIA, INC. PHOTOS

6. Keep mostly dry during winter. Do not fertilize during cold weather. In the spring, transplant cactus seedlings into individual pots for another year. Then transplant outside into the garden at 2 years old. This gives each plant a chance to develop a robust, healthy root system and allows you to harden them off (expose them to greater degrees of sun and the elements over a period of two weeks or so). It also gives them a better chance against critters or pests that might eat them, such as rats, because the plants will be larger and better rooted and not easily pulled up. Once transplanted into pots, water once a month at most during the spring and summer. Stop watering in the winter. Fertilizing with a balanced natural fertilizer when watering will suffice. This is the rule for when they get out of the 'first-year baby' stage. Once established (after a year in the ground), they only need the water that falls from the sky. If it stops raining (like now), water once a month, or every two months.

Growing tips

If you can't find cactus seeds at local nurseries or online, buy whole cactus plants and then collect seeds from them after they bloom. You can transplant cactus seedlings into your garden when they are just 1 year old, but they still will need to go through a period of hardening off, will require additional watering during long, hot, dry periods when small and might be more susceptible to pests, critters, etc. When preparing a bed, it is best to make a raised or mounded bed at least 6 inches deep. Amend the existing soil so that it contains about 25 percent compost and 25 percent limestone sand or granite sand; mix it well. The mounded/

@ statesman.com/gardening

Keep up with Renee Studebaker's gardening adventures in her blog, Renee's Roots. raised bed allows for increased drainage. I water my cactus once a week for two weeks when I first plant them (in the spring or summer), and maybe water them once every month from then on during the first summer. This is not necessary. It just makes them grow faster. Cactus can take full sun, but what most people do not realize is that a lot of cactus can grow in part shade and prefer some protection from the sun (especially western exposures).

— Sean Watson

CALENDAR ■ GARDEN

Pots and Plants Garden Center Peach festivities. 2 p.m. today: Peach pie cooking demonstration with Diane McIngvale. Pots and Plants Garden Center, 5902 Bee Cave Road. Free. 327-4564, www.plasticpinkflamingos.com.

Classes at The Natural Gardener. Saturdays through mid-September. Begins 9 a.m. today: A Grounds Tour of The Natural Gardener. The Natural Gardener, 8648 Old Bee Cave Road. Free. 288-6113.

Annual 4th of July Butterfly Count. 8 a.m. today. Count butterfly adults and caterpillars within a 15-mile diameter circle centered at Mount Bonnell. Meet at Zilker Botanical Garden parking lot, 2220 Barton Springs Road. Free. www.austinbutterflies.org

Austin Public Library Green Living Talks. Varying times through Aug. 1. 7 p.m. Tuesday: 'Conserve Energy and Save Money.' Southeast Austin Community Branch, 5803 Nuckols Crossing Road. Free. Check Web site for schedule and locations.

www.ci.austin.tx.us/library

Round Rock Community Garden Club. 9:15 a.m. July 6. Natalie Vreeland will speak on 'Assisting Wildlife to Survive in Texas: From Hummingbirds to Lizards.' Baca Center, 301 W. Bagdad St., Building 2, Round Rock. Free. For information, contact 512-281-5499.

Becoming a Garden Detective: Diagnosing Plant Problems. 10 a.m. July 11. Learn the causes of plant problems, the process for diagnosing plant problems, and preventive garden management techniques. Zilker Botanical Garden, 2220 Barton Springs Road. Free. 854-9600.

17th Annual Texas Bamboo Festival. Aug. 22 and 23. Bamboo plants and crafts for sale. Lectures, presentations and live auction. Zilker Botanical Garden, 2220 Barton Springs Road. www.bamboocentral.net.

Send garden calendar listings to garden@statesman.com.

— Compiled by Ameera Butt

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