

Sedum, A Drought-Tolerant Perennial

By Susan Camp

On a warm day a few weeks ago, I walked around our property to see how some of the plants had fared over the winter. Most of the shrubs and trees looked good, but the perennials hadn't poked their heads out, except for the tiny green shoots of an 'Autumn Joy' sedum, also known as 'Herbstfreude.' This particular sedum was a leftover from our garden makeover, plopped into a black plastic pot and forgotten for two years. Last spring, I moved the sedum to a clay pot by the entrance drive near the garage, a spot way down on the watering priority list. It thrived there, producing large dusty rose blooms, which were enhanced by the succulent green leaves. As the summer progressed, the blooms changed to deep bronze, then to brown over the winter. I clipped the dried stalks that day, patting myself on the back that I had found the right plant for the right spot.

Sedum is a genus of at least 400 species of herbaceous perennials. It is native to Europe, Siberia and western Asia, and North Africa. In the United States, sedum can be grown in USDA Hardiness Zones 3 through 9. It also is called stonecrop. The Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder contains over 50 sedum entries.

Low-growing sedums, some as short as 2 inches in height, make attractive ground covers and rock garden plants. Tall cultivars, like 'Autumn Joy' with its showy flowers, work well at the backs of borders. Sedums attract butterflies and hummingbirds and are drought, deer, and rabbit tolerant.

Sedums are low maintenance plants. They prefer average, well-drained, sandy or clayey soil with a neutral pH of 7.0. Full sun is a necessity, although some varieties will tolerate light shade. Add a layer of compost and 2 inches of mulch in the spring.

Sedum are propagated by division, or from seed or cuttings. Divide plants in the spring or fall. Many creeping varieties will rapidly root from stem nodes, dropped leaves, or stem fragments. Some varieties can become invasive.

Overwatering is the #1 killer of sedums; their fleshy leaves hold water, and too much water will cause leaf rot. Their primary pests are snails, slugs, mealybugs, and scale insects.

With foliage that varies from blue/green to silver/gray to burgundy/ purple/ or chartreuse/gold and flowers in shades of white, yellow, orange, pink, red, and purple, sedums offer an enormous variety of options for a hot, sunny spot in the flower garden. Sedums also add color and texture to fresh and dried arrangements.

New cultivars appear on the market every spring. Some may be available only online from reputable nurseries. Buy plants from local growers or plants grown in an environment similar to coastal Virginia, if possible.

Sedum telephium 'Matrona' grows to 24 inches and appears similar to 'Autumn Joy', but bears bright pink, rose, and cream flowers. The foliage is blue/green with burgundy stems. 'Matrona' blooms from August to October.

Sedum spathulifolium 'Cape Blanco' grows 4 to 6 inches high and spreads easily, forming a thick mat. 'Cape Blanco' will tolerate partial shade. Small, star-shaped yellow flowers bloom in May and June on silvery, rosette-shaped leaf clusters.

Sedum album 'Coral Carpet' is another creeping, mat-forming sedum, 2 to 4 inches high with coral leaves in spring that become green in summer and change to reddish-bronze in the fall. Star-like, pale pinkish-white flowers bloom in June.

Hot, sunny garden spots with poor to average soil often are hard to fill. The many species and cultivars of succulent sedum can provide the right flower for the right space. Besides borders and rock gardens, sedums make great container plants. They can be grown on rock ledges and between stepping stones, although most species will not take heavy foot traffic. Miniature sedums are popular in fairy gardens and terrariums and in picture frame arrangements mounted on a structure wall. Sedums can be mass-planted to form living "green roofs."

March 22, 2018