



## Helpline Hot Topic for May 2021

### What's Bugging My Succulents?

By Cynthia Zimmerman

*"Nature will bear the closest inspection. She invites us to lay our eye level with her smallest leaf, and take an insect view of its plain." – Henry David Thoreau*

Succulents are generally considered to be easy to grow; requiring a minimal amount of attention. They come in many beautiful shapes, sizes and colors and can produce some very unique and surprising floral displays.

I decided to try my hand at growing various succulents about five years ago because of the rather difficult micro-climates that I have on my patio and front porch; part of the day there is intense sun while the rest of the day it is very shaded. Most plants don't like it. My succulents seemed to like it and required very little care until this year. I repotted a number of them in February in anticipation of spring growth. They seemed happy. All of a sudden several of the plants were covered with black aphids. I had never associated aphids with succulents. This caused me to wonder what other little beasties I should watch for and what to do if they arrived. Interestingly succulents are susceptible to many of the same more common "bugs" that plague the rest of the plants in the garden; mealybugs, scale, red spider mites, and aphids. Though not quite as frequent on succulents, these pests can arrive unexpectedly which means we need to be vigilant and address the problems early on or our beauties will suffer.

**Mealy bugs** are tiny fuzzy looking elliptical white, gray or light brown insects. Often they are first noticed because of the cottony substance on the plant, particularly the stems. You may even notice ants who like the sticky sweet honeydew secreted by the mealybugs. If possible, an infested plant should be quarantined (that's something we've become quite familiar with) so that the insects don't spread. It can be treated by applying alcohol on a cotton swab directly on the insects and the fuzz. Unfortunately, they are not easy to get rid of, so treatment requires vigilance and repetition. For more information about mealy bugs and recommendations on how to deal with them: **Mealy bugs** <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/QT/mealybugscard.html>

**Scales** that most commonly attack succulents are the armored scale and the soft scale insects. They can have the appearance of brown, flat or slightly mounded, waxy scales on the plant stems. The insect actually hides under the scales while it feeds on sap and at the same time can transmit viruses to the plant. Because they reproduce rapidly they can cover a plant in a matter of a few days. They particularly focus on the new growth parts of the plant. First quarantine the plant to limit spread to other plants. It is possible to remove the scales with your fingers, tweezers, or a strong stream of water. There can be scarring left on the stems since the scale attaches itself rather securely to the plant. Alcohol on a cotton swab can be used for scale, too. This insect is also one that is not easy to get rid of and may require multiple treatments. For further information on scale and other methods of control: **Scales** <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/QT/scalescard.html>

**Red spider mites** are not spiders but very tiny mites that might require a magnifying glass to see. Often it is the silky webs that they leave on plants that are the first clue of their presence. Red spider mites thrive when it's hot and dry which can cause them to reproduce rapidly. Since they do not like humid environments, spraying succulents with water can deter mite attacks. You can also deal with spider mites in the same manner as mealy bugs and scales by applying alcohol with a cotton swab directly on the mites. Again, repeated treatment may be required. More information about spider mites and treatment can be found at: **Spider mites** <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/QT/spidermitescard.html>

**Aphids**, one of the most common and recognizable insect pests, are usually seen as green or black congregations on soft plant tissues. As sucking insects they leave in their wake sticky honeydew that can attract ants and encourage the growth of black mold. The most recommended way to get rid of them is with a strong stream of water from the hose. On succulents this can be difficult since the aphids get down in all the nooks, crannies and folds of the plants. A secondary method is to spray a few drops of soap mixed with water from a spray bottle. Aphids tend to disappear with hot weather but waiting instead of treating may result in misshapen leaves and stunted growth due to aphid damage. For other methods of treatment: **Aphids** <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/QT/aphidscard.html>

I have shared here the very briefest of information on four of the most common pests found on succulents. There are other problems that can also appear on them. The control methods I have suggested are the least toxic and least damaging to the environment. The IPM website references above also provide control methods that may include pesticides. If you would like more information on succulent pests, the following websites offer pictures and suggestions but are not endorsed by Master Gardeners of Fresno or UC ANR or UC Davis.

[Pests and Diseases | World of Succulents](https://worldofsucculents.com/cultivation/pests-and-diseases/) <https://worldofsucculents.com/cultivation/pests-and-diseases/> Pictures of pest damage to succulents

[Common Pests & Diseases treatment for Succulents - Succulents Box](https://succulentsbox.com/pages/common-pests-diseases)  
<https://succulentsbox.com/pages/common-pests-diseases> Quick reference and good pictures