

Garden Sages/Marge Hols
Grandmother's Dish
Garden Meets the
Resurgence of Succulents

As a child, my favorite spot during cold winter days in Western Massachusetts was Grandmother's sunroom, an oasis filled with wicker furniture and lush greenery. Tucked among the Boston ferns, English ivies and colorful geraniums was a small ceramic donkey cart planted with cacti and succulents—in the vernacular of the day, a grandmother's dish garden.

So, when Nancy Scherer and I planned the horticulture schedule for the Saint Paul Garden Club's 2012 history-themed flower show, "The Way We Were," we decided to include a class called "Grandmother's Dish Garden." With succulents making a strong comeback in the houseplant world, the class drew a delightful group of entries.

It also kindled a new passion—how could I make just one mini-garden when there's such a charming array of plant choices? I wanted to try them all! Agaves, aloes, echeverias, jades, haworthias, kalanchoes and sedums provide all manner of fascinating shapes and colors that combine beautifully in a pot. Several pots, grouped on a table, make an instant centerpiece.

Hunting for a vintage container is half the fun of making a dish garden. Nancy and I scavenged antique shops in Saint Paul and Stillwater and unearthed everything from swans to pumpkins to, yes, donkey carts.



Marge's dish garden with baby toes, bears claw, pine cone cactus, Gasteraloe 'Hummel's Silver'

Finding small, succulent plants for dish gardens is easy. Bachman's, Gertens and many smaller nurseries and garden centers stock them year round for a few dollars a plant. (Unfortunately, we just lost the best selection, complete with botanical names, when Linder's closed.)

Success with succulents does involve a few rules. First, most need sun; a bright south window that gets at least four hours of sunlight a day is ideal. Second, water sparingly or you'll kill the plants. Use "cactus mix" potting soil to provide good drainage. Ideally, use a pot with a drainage hole. Many vintage dish garden containers do not have a drainage hole, however, because they're meant to sit on tables. So, you have to be very careful not to overwater. Experiment—as little as a tablespoon a week may be enough, especially in winter.

Compose your dish garden by choosing succulents in varied shapes, textures and colors. Top dress the soil with small pebbles. Add a whimsical ornament to complete your composition.