



Aloe rupestris grows to tree-like heights with branching flower spikes. **Kenneth Setzer** - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

HOME & GARDEN

APRIL 14, 2017 12:53 PM

Grow a beautiful medicinal garden with aloes

BY KENNETH SETZER
Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden



It's time we talked about aloe. So easy to grow, beautiful, intriguing, almost mythical as a healing plant, cultivated as a medicinal plant for more than 2,500 years. You too can grow it, propagate it, and share it with friends. This plant really does thrive on benign neglect.

Aloe vera, previously called *A. barbadensis*, is the aloe we picture as defining the plant, but there are hundreds of aloe species in addition to cultivated varieties, i.e. cultivars. Aloe as a genus originates in sub-Saharan Africa, Madagascar, and the Arabian Peninsula

The various species, more than 450 of them, share superficial similarities, but aloes have given botanists a difficult time over the years. In trying to subdivide the genus into closely related groups, they've used morphology (physical similarities), microscopic surface texture, DNA, even the chemical compounds in the mucilage, but nothing's been conclusive or in agreement.

THE MUCILAGE IN ALOE LEAVES IS BELIEVED TO BE MEDICINALLY POTENT, USUALLY FOR SOOTHING SKIN ABRASIONS AND BURNS.

The mucilage is believed to be medicinally potent, usually for soothing skin abrasions and burns. Like many succulents, *Aloe* is adapted for life without regular watering, and therefore has developed thick, stubby leaves to store water. The leaves contain this mucilage.

Be aware that some *Aloe* species can be poisonous.

Succulents are popular house and garden plants, but they do not form a botanical group, or taxon, and many are not very closely related. Succulence is more of a way of life shared by many plants through convergence. They are like the camels of the plant kingdom.

I've had succulents drop dead from excess humidity in a matter of days. However aloe has tolerated the extremes of my excess watering, as well as being tossed into a shady garden area and forgotten, roots exposed. They've proven themselves; they want to live!

They spread without being invasive. I have never bought an *Aloe vera*, but have received many from gardeners with excess offshoots. A few years back, Fairchild's volunteer director gave me some large aloe plants that have thrived in a very inhospitable area of my yard with direct sun, sandy, rocky soil (preferred by most aloe), and water runoff from the roof. They've grown huge, flowered in long yellow racemes, and provided dozens of offshoots. The individual flowers open from the bottom up, so the show lasts.

Some *Aloe vera* appear with spotted leaves. These are sometimes called *Aloe vera* var. *chinensis*. However, I've noticed the pale spots disappear as the plant matures.

Most aloe can be grown from seed, but the seedlings rot easily in our climate. Oddly, *Aloe vera* never sets viable seed, possibly sterile as a result of millennia of cultivation and modification. *Aloe vera* suckers will appear next to the mature plant often, and can soon be separated from the mother plant. Let them form a callous over the area of separation before replanting, usually a couple days.

If you want to get exotic, some aloes to try include *Aloe rupestris*, an arborescent plant from southern Africa reaching 20 feet with branching inflorescences topped in red-orange flowers like flames on a candelabrum, or try the shorter but similar *Aloe ferox*. *Aloe sinkatana*, a stemless *Aloe* with bright yellow and red flowers and spotted leaves, is a stunner.

From tree-like to bushy and stemless, aloes span a range of habits. Plant yours in sandy soil, in a raised area to improve drainage. A rock garden is also ideal for [aloe](#). Here at Fairchild, we grow over 50 species and cultivars for you to appreciate.

The best way to get into aloes is to get a small offshoot from a gardener friend, keep it well drained, and contemplate the journey of its species from Arabia across the globe over thousands of years.

Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.