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Looking sharp: Botanic Gardens unveils new cactus garden

By **Megan Backhouse**
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Everyone has a taste for cacti and succulents now. Even people who don't usually describe themselves as gardeners have taken to visiting nurseries brandishing photographs of strange, spiky species they want to start tending. Cacti and succulents can be small enough for windowsills, tough enough for rooftops and dramatic enough to set the tone on sprawling country estates.

But it wasn't always like this. Ralph Field was in the minority when he fell for these plants more than a century ago. Even more unusual was the fact that he was only 12. Californian film stars might have had a penchant for cacti and succulents then but not so much children in Kew.

Andrew Laidlaw and Bret Pritchard in the new Arid Garden. JASON SOUTH

Field's enthusiasm ran deep. It wasn't shaken by his time at war, or by his move to the country to become a farmer. In the 1930s, he paid for a share in a cacti and succulent collecting trip to South America by German botanical explorer Harry Blossfeld. The specimens Blossfeld sent included white hairy *Oreocereus* species from mountaintops in the Andes, plump *Echinopsis huascha* from Argentina and thin *Echinopsis camarguensis* from Bolivia, among many other.

The cacti spines light up in the morning and evening light. JASON SOUTH

And Field didn't stop there. His collection continued to grow and then it grew even more when he passed his plants on to his son, Robert. The resulting collection is now under the stewardship of Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens and is the central focus of the new Arid Garden that opened last week. The garden highlights the role succulents can play as our climate continues to get hotter and drier.

While nearly all cacti are succulent, not all succulent plants are cacti. Succulence is a general description that covers any plant with thick, fleshy leaves or stems that store water, while the term cacti refers to members of the plant family *Cactaceae.* The water-storing capacity of succulents (including cacti) is what makes them resilient in the face of drought and prolonged heat. But no plant is indestructible and it still takes work to keep a garden like this looking at its best.

Cacti in the new Arid Garden. JASON SOUTH

For those wanting to achieve a similar effect at home, landscape architect Andrew Laidlaw, who designed the Arid Garden, and horticulturalist Bret Pritchard, its curator, have some advice. While the plants in an arid garden can accommodate both extreme heat and extreme cold, what they categorically won't stand for is

water logging. Pritchard and Laidlaw suggest maximising drainage by creating mounded beds. They have also encouraged drainage by using a heavily sand-based growing medium.

While these plants have very low water requirements (it is an "arid garden" after all,) they can't go without it entirely. Pritchard says that, in their natural environments, they experience "torrential summer rains" and that giving the plants a "good soak" every two to three weeks during warm, dry months will promote growth and flowering.

And never forgo mulch. It helps insulate soil, fosters good soil health and suppresses weeds. Laidlaw says visually, he finds the sort of chunky rock used to mulch the Arid Garden "a lovely foil" for cacti and succulents.

Aesthetically, he likes to repeat certain plants (including tall columnar species) in large groups to create a sense of rhythm. One of the barriers to doing this at home is that many of these succulents are expensive, if they can be bought at all. While the temptation is to buy just one specimen of lots of different kinds of succulents, Laidlaw advises against one-offs. He also encourages home gardeners to think about contrasts between textures and forms, such as the way he has paired broad-paddled *Opuntia* species with the vertical *Oreocereus* ones.

When it comes to planting many of these specimens, a complicating factor is the fact they are covered in spines – some finer than hair – that can easily becoming lodged in the skin. Staff at the gardens wrapped many of the plants in foam when handling them. Some of the barrel cacti specimens were lowered into the ground on pieces of hessian that has been left in the soil to rot down.

The sheer height of some of the columnar cacti in the Arid Garden has also meant some supports have been required. While these plants are acclimatised to wind in their natural environment, Pritchard says those grown relatively quickly in nurseries can be prone to snapping after they are first planted out.

Finally, Laidlaw advises keeping a tight rein on some of the faster-growing succulents to ensure they don't create too much blurring between plants, and water down your original design. You want to keep the effect sculptural. Keep your eye on any plants that are starting to run out of steam, and cut them back or otherwise rejuvenate them. An advantage of many of these plants is that they can be readily propagated by stem cuttings.

The new Arid Garden is part of the larger Arid and Drylands Precinct. Enter through Gate C on Anderson Street, South Yarra.