

2019 Tour Essay 3rd Place: Cynthia Von Halle

Crazy for Cactus

During the recent Desert - Wise Landscape Tour, I find myself at a lovely homestead in Landers, surrounded by an artistic collection of spiny cacti and bizarre fleshy succulents. This is my "succulent Sunday" assignment as a Docent. The Giant Rock, with its weird alien energy and spaceship lore is nearby. By contrast, the setting here is calm and welcoming with attractive gardens and a variety of small ponds and water features. It feels organic, natural and a bit wild. An 8 ft. Blue Agave claims one corner of the fenced yard, and displays a giant twisted stalk of unfurling flowers. The smaller tender pups from this "mother plant" are dispersed across the yard in rocky niches. Prickly Golden Barrels mingle with softer annuals and shrubs. Mesquite and Paleo Verde trees tower over the main yard with lacy branches, lending shade to wandering paths. Fountains gurgle softly, attracting small desert birds.

Today's perfusion of succulents triggers a painful memory from long ago- I killed a beautiful Beavertail cactus. I added fertilizer (!) and over - watered it to force colorful blooms. My conversations with plant enthusiasts on the landscape tour remind me that succulents are equipped to store water. They need little maintenance and are easy to propagate and share with neighbors. They can thrive in shade or hot sun, in containers or planted in rocky ground. Seeing their spectacular flowers and interesting texture revives my passion to create small rock gardens.

At the end of the day, I'm looking forward to planting strange cactus and unusual succulents. I've been lured down a path in search of bold spiny sculptures that thrive in rocky drainages. No aliens, please, just tough sun loving plants, uniquely adapted to thrive in our High Desert.