

Hit a wall? Try planting it

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THE garden is shrinking. Flowers and shrubs are losing ground, experts say, especially in places such as California, where the surreal real estate market has driven many people to maximize the footprint of their home.

Though no data exist on garden size specifically, the National Assn. of Home

Builders reports that the median size of new U.S. houses has grown 16% in the last 10 years, while the average lot has gotten smaller. What's a space-crunched green thumb to do? Borrow an idea from the pros and go vertical. At the West Hollywood Gateway shopping center, designers created a vertical landscape, a living tapestry of succulents that you can re-create on a smaller scale at home.

Making your vertical space come alive

Though the Gateway succulent wall required complicated engineering because of its sheer size, designers say a similar effect can easily be achieved on a smaller scale by home gardeners. The key is a willingness to experiment with your materials and your approach, not to mention the need to select hardy, low-water plants. That's where succulents come in. Some tips:

Structure: The Gateway designers' intricate system is built around irrigation tubes, but you can take a simpler approach: Think of the succulent walls as a series of individual planters to be mounted on, hung from, or propped against a wall or trellis. This will make the project more manageable.

Materials: Assemble each planter like a hanging basket. The ambitious can sew their own baskets like the Gateway "soil socks." Those designers tried canvas but switched to the material used on tennis court fences. Use non-biodegradable material that allows water in and prevents dirt from coming out.

Shortcut: Buy pre-made hanging baskets and arrange them in mass, says Molly Thongthiraj, manager of the California Cactus Center in Pasadena. A 15-inch-deep wire cone pre-lined with moss and equipped with a hanging wire sells for about \$24; baskets come in other sizes and shapes. Line one half of the basket with moisture-retaining planter moss, fill the middle with soil, then line the other half with moss. Secure the two halves together with fishing line.

Plant selection: Inexpensive succulents in 3-inch pots at nurseries and home supply stores will work, says Jeri Oka, director of landscape design for Jerde Partnership and one of the brains behind the Gateway wall. "All the common ones are fine," she says. The shopping center's planting is heavy on Echeveria species but also includes Sedum morganianum (donkey tail), staghorn ferns and jade as filler. Thongthiraj likes Echeveria harmsii 'Red Velvet,' the variegated Aeonium 'Kiwi,' various sedums and a draping species of Kalanchoe.

Cuttings: If you want to include cuttings from jade and other plants, wait two to three weeks for the cuttings to take root before installing them in your baskets.

Plugging: If you've sewn your own soil sock, cut tiny holes through which you can install the plants. "It's like you're doing a hair transplant," Oka says. If you're using pre-made hanging baskets, use a chopstick or pick to wedge the succulents into the soil. Plant them so that when fully grown, the basket moss (or soil sock) won't be visible. Assemble your baskets or soil socks en masse or in a pattern on the wall.

Watering: Set up drip irrigation. If that's not possible, Thongthiraj suggests taking each planter and soaking it in a tub once a week. Shortcut: Just hose down the whole wall, she says. The smaller the planter or soil sock, the faster it will dry out.

Life span: Well-tended, succulents should last as long on the wall as they do in the ground. Trim plants to keep them tightly packed and not too leggy.

Think of this maintenance work as a bonus. Says Thongthiraj: "People have started whole succulent gardens with wreaths that they have bought from us."