

# Real Estate

## GREEN HOUSE Garden in a bottle C.S. BEWLI ...

Terrarium or a bottle garden is a good option for those who love gardening but have very little space to exercise their "green fingers" fully. Terrariums are best suited for small apartments and for balcony and indoor gardening. It is a miniature landscape grown in a glass container that is created by growing small ornamental plants in an artistic manner. The closed environment increases the humidity and allows the plants that prefer a moist habitat to grow in their own self-maintained small ecosystem by recycling their own water, based on the principle of evaporation and condensation.



A terrarium can be made in any glass container that has a lid to keep the moisture from escaping, but a wide-mouthed clear smooth glass jar is easy to handle while creating a landscape and also offers the best view of the plants. For the success of such terrariums the glass lid should be opened for some time if there is condensation on the glass. This will allow evaporation as excess moisture can be harmful for plants.

Apart from these few precautions, these closed bottle gardens need very less attention once the plants are "acclimatised" properly. The plants can survive in this glass "home" for four to five months without any additional watering; however, some water can be sprinkled if at any time there is lack of moisture and the compost approaches dryness. The right word for such a creation is neglect; you just plant and forget!

The ease with which these lightweight table-top mini gardens can be shifted inside on special occasions has brought a change in the way people decorate their homes. These also make unique gifts for special friends.

Peperomia caperata, Saxifraga stolonifera, Soleirolia soleirolii (baby's tears), Fittonia verschaffeltii, dwarf flowering species of Rhizomatous begonias, button ferns, slow-growing maidenhair ferns, Variegated spider fern, Pilea involucrata and Selaginella kraussiana are the plant species that enjoy the moist compost and high humidity available in a closed terrarium environment; other species may also be tried.

Cacti and other succulent plants are naturally suitable for terrariums with an open top as their requirement of water after the initial set up is very less. There is no fixed recipe for how much watering is needed, but as a rule of thumb, water only when the soil

approaches dryness. To be on the safer side it is always better to water less in such terrariums as it is a difficult task to remove the excess water; most of the succulent lovers lose more plants by over-watering than by under-watering.

### **The ideal plants:**

- \* Are slow growing and can remain in a terrarium for a longtime.
- \* Need less care and maintenance.

Foliage of green, variegated and colourful succulents may also be planted.

Smaller and slow-growing flowering species of succulents such as sedums, echeverias, aloes, sempervivums, hardy haworthias, drimiopsis, gasterias, agaves, eurphorbias and jade plants are ideal plants and a natural choice for terrariums. Ariocarpus retusus, Lophophora williamsii, Melocactus matanzanus, Gymnocalycium mihanoivichii, Echinocereus rigidissimus, pectinifera and many other species are smaller and robust growing flowering species of cacti that do very well.

### **Tending tips**

- \* With the passage of time some plants will overgrow, these should be replaced with suitable plants.
- \* Occasionally cut back succulents that grow in size.
- \* Do not fertilise the plants to keep them under control and restrict them from overgrowing.
- \* Remove dead/dried leaves and algae or fungus that might gather in the terrarium periodically.
- \* Replace dead plants.
- \* Place the terrarium in a bright area, but not in direct sunlight.
- \* Keep moving the terrarium around on alternate days otherwise the plants that do not get enough light will lose their original shape.
- \* Never allow the soil to dry out.

## Terrarium DIY

\* Select a suitable glass container and first of all add a layer of pebbles for good drainage. Pebbles will also catch excess water.

\* Add sterilised and nutritious cactus compost; the total depth of the first layer and the cactus compost should be about one-fourth the height of the container.

\* For aesthetics, the compost should be piled higher in the back and lower towards the front with some depressions in between.

\* Put the selected plants one by one taking care that the tall plants are at the back in the higher region and shorter ones are in the front. Move the terrarium around and look for the best combination and arrangement of plants. The placement of plants should give an illusion of a miniature landscape.

\* Add some compost in and around the plants to give them better support.

\* Spread gravel and moss at suitable places on the top surface and aesthetically place small moisture-resistant decorative items such as pieces of rock, ceramic huts and figurines etc. to add to the appeal of the landscape. A couple of minute solar lights will add grace and glamour to the terrarium in the evenings.

\* Spray water until the soil gets just moist. Mist the inside of the glass to wash down splashed soil. Put on the glass top and the garden is on its own.

\* Check terrarium the next day; it should have slight moisture around the top. If too much moisture condenses on the sides, take the top off for a few hours.

\* For a few days keep the terrarium in shade and gradually bring it to bright light, but not direct sunlight.



— The writer is President of the National Cactus and Succulent Society of India

Cacti as a whole do not make good terrarium inhabitants. The main problem is moisture. Most cacti and many succulents come from extremely arid environments. The terrarium is just the opposite - the whole idea is to maintain humidity. Faced with the higher humidity & stagnant air, cacti and many succulents do very poorly and soon suffer from fungal/bacterial problems. Light is another problem. Most require very high light levels. But in the close confines of a terrarium, this results in high temps that would "cook" them.

Now an open terrarium would be a different situation. It would likely be very challenging but might be possible. As people experiment with plants for such a terrarium, I hope they will let me know as to their successes and failures.

Some possible candidate plants to experimnt with if one does decide to attempt an open terr/desertarium might be:

Unfortunately, truth be told, there really aren't any for a closed terr. This question comes up every so often -- not surprising as there are some neat cacti and succulents out there. That being the case, rather than simply omit any reference to desert terr, it seemed wise to address this issue.