

Dudleyas

By Jodi Bay

Succulents are a plant species that have become a favorite garden staple. The wide variety of succulent options provides beautiful tapestries of color, texture and shape. The additional benefit of their low water needs makes succulents an ideal choice for San Diego gardens.

A lesser-known species of those succulents is the dudleya, a member of the *Crassulaceae*, or stonecrop, family. This plant family has only 46 varieties classified as dudleya. The habitat ranges from Coastal and Southern California to Baja Mexico and it is the only succulent native to San Diego County. They are commonly known as ‘liveforevers,’ as their lifespan can be 50 to 100 years.

Dudleyas were discovered by William Russel Dudley, head of the Botany Department at Stanford University from 1892 to 1911. His collection of California plants is considered one of the most important collections of California flora and comprised the core of Stanford’s Dudley Herbarium. In the mid-1960s, it merged and relocated to the University of California, Berkeley, and is now part of the University and Jepson Herbaria at Berkeley.

Dudleyas are categorized into two forms: branching and unbranching. The ‘branching’ refers to whether or not the plant spreads. ‘Branching’ dudleyas, such as coast dudleya (*Dudleya caespitosa*), form multiple rosettes and are low in height. This type creates a good ground cover or garden border. ‘Unbranching’ dudleyas, such as giant chalk dudleya (*Dudleya brittonii*), are identified by a single, large rosette. This eye-catching form stands out as the centerpiece in a garden.



Photo: Jodi L. Bay

Giant chalk dudleya (*Dudleya brittonii*) in bloom. It is an example of an ‘unbranching’ dudleya.

every two weeks is recommended. In nature, dudleyas are found on hillsides and rocky cliffs. Tipping a dudleya plant up to 45 degrees when planting mimics their natural environment; enables a pathway for water to escape the leaves; and also creates an eye-catching design.

Two sap-sucking pests that infest dudleya are mealybugs and aphids. Mealybugs can be identified by white, cottony masses on the plant. They thrive in the leaf crevasses and aphids live on the flower stems. The damage can be light to moderate, and natural predators and parasites are likely to adequately manage any infestation. But to help eradicate these pests, a strong stream of water can wash aphids from the flower stems. Pruning the stems can remove aphids, as well.

One of the biggest threats to dudleyas is poaching on public and private lands. Tens of thousands of specimens, including hybrids—valued at many thousands of dollars—are removed annually for international black-market sales. Their small size, beautiful color and shape, and long life are a draw for many collectors. California has recently passed—and the Governor has signed—AB 223 which specifically prohibits dudleya poaching. This bill increases penalties for dudleya theft from state, local, or private lands.

Dudleya plants can be purchased (legally) from many California native nurseries. They are a good choice for a low-water, long-lasting, and stunning garden addition.

For questions on home gardening, contact the UCCE Master Gardeners of San Diego County Hotline at (858) 822-6910 or by email at help@mastergardenerssandiego.org.

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Dudleya farinosa photo source and credit:
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Photo: Brad Kelley

Bluff lettuce (*Dudleya farinosa*) is a type of ‘branching’ dudleya and can be used as a ground cover or as a border plant.

San Diego’s Mediterranean climate is ideal for growing dudleyas. They are a seasonal succulent that goes dormant in the warmer months of May through August. Water requirements are low year-round, and it is recommended to withhold water during the summer. For more efficient watering, co-locate succulents with other plants that have the same water requirements and dormancy.

Dudleyas are generally easy to care for. Overwatering, however, may result in root rot that could kill the plant. Plant in well-draining soil. If planting in sandy soil, summer irrigation