

Staying inspired about gardening can be a real challenge as summer temperatures soar. Weeks of temperatures far exceeding 80 degrees and precipitation that seems to come only in the form of afternoon deluges can drive even the most dedicated gardener indoors to read a good book.

If you find yourself uninspired to work in your garden, but would still like to look outdoors at beautiful plantings, you might consider adding a few hardy perennials that really thrive under these hot, dry conditions. Stonecrops are just the plants.

Stonecrop is just one of the many common names of the plants sempervivums and sedums. Sempervivums, also known as Hen and chicks or houseleeks are short, thick, succulent, herbaceous evergreen perennials that have a rosette growth habit. While grown mostly for their foliage, they do flower, with colors ranging from greenish yellow to rose to white.

Sempervivums get their common name “Hen and chicks” because one parent rosette sends out additional rosettes that surround it, thus resembling a mother hen and her chicks. The common name “houseleek” comes from the fact that they are commonly grown on rooftops throughout Europe.

The native habitat of these plants is mainly mountainous regions around the world, which explains their propensity for growing in poor soils, drought conditions and areas with winter cold. Their only real requirement is good drainage, particularly in the winter.

Sedums are also succulent, herbaceous perennials, although they may be deciduous as well as evergreen. Their habits are variable, with some erect or bushy and others creeping and mat forming groundcovers. Grown primarily for their beautiful foliage of blue-gray, green, purple and red, they also have attractive and showy flowers in yellow, white and pink.

Sedums establish themselves well on rocks and wall surfaces due to their ability to thrive in bright sunlight, poor soils and drought conditions. These plants are even good choices for that very difficult planting location, dry shade. As with sempervivums excess winter moisture should be avoided.

To have success growing sempervivums and sedums, place them in a well-drained location that receives full sun to partial shade. Ideally the soil mix should include coarse sand or a non-compacting aggregate. Irrigation is seldom, if ever necessary, except during plant establishment. If foliage growth is desired a soluble fertilizer can be applied in spring or early summer.

These plants are so hardy and such consistent performers that any gardener will welcome them, whether as part of an alpine or rock garden, on a bare slope with poor soil, in crevices of a dry laid stone wall, as edging plants or front of border accents or even in trough and container gardens. As the gardening season

progresses, so will their foliage colors and flowers; always providing dramatic color changes that add a strong visual impact to the garden.

Perhaps the most interesting location sempervivums and sedums are being grown in Albemarle County is atop the roof of the County Office Building. Planted as a “green roof,” these plants are working as natural sponges to collect water and pollutants before they are able to run off the building and into our local waterways. They are reducing the reflective heat off the roof’s surface and insulating the building against both heat and cold. Now, those are some tough little plants.