

Aloe Vera

Aloe vera (*Aloe barbadensis*) is probably the most widely used medicinal plant in the world. It is originally from Africa, but the exact geographic origin of Aloe vera is questionable because it is easily transplanted and has been used medicinally for over 6,000 years. It is widely used in the home to treat burns but has been used to treat other maladies by various cultures. There are references to Aloe vera from the Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Indian, and Chinese cultures. The Spanish brought it to South America and the Caribbean Islands. It is in most homes and people continue to share it with friends.

There are about 180 Aloe species. All are succulents and they range from short-stalked clumps, like Aloe vera, to trunk forming forms that resemble small trees. In Africa, they occupy a similar ecological niche that Agaves occupy in the American southwest. Aloe vera grows as a flattened, rosette which spreads outward by underground rhizomes and forms a cluster of fleshy leaves edged with short, soft prickles. The leaves are usually 8 to 10 inches long and speckled with patches of light green and gray, giving a mottled appearance. Aloe vera can be grown outdoors in areas where there is no chance of freezing and produces flowers in the spring in the desert. The flower stem is 2 to 3 feet tall and topped with profuse tubular pink-coral or yellow flowers.

Aloe vera makes an excellent potted indoor plant when kept in a bright location near a south or west facing window. During the summer months, the soil should be completely soaked, but allowed to dry between watering. Use a good commercial potting mix with extra perlite, granite grit, or coarse sand added or packaged 'cacti mix' potting soil. The pot should have a large drainage hole. Fertilize in the spring with a light application of indoor plant fertilizer. Potted Aloe vera plants can be moved outdoors during the summer if you remember to bring them back indoors prior to the first fall freeze.



Potted Aloe Vera; photo by Jeff Schalau, University of Arizona. s

Aloes are often propagated by removing the offsets (also called pups) which are produced around the base of mature plants. These can be removed when they are a couple of inches tall. If needed, cut the offset away from the mother plant with a clean sharp knife. Allow the wounded area to dry and scab over for a week or so before replanting in the potting mix. This is to prevent disease organisms from entering the young plant through the wound. After a month or so, the offset should develop roots. Aloes can also be grown from seed but takes time and this propagation method is most successful under greenhouse conditions.

While medical research has failed to validate many of the believed properties of Aloe vera, fresh sap is widely used to sooth minor burns and insect bites. For this use, cut a mature leaf (1 inch wide) from the plant, slice horizontally, and apply sap directly to the affected area. If additional sap is needed, slice the leaf again and more sap can be squeezed from the leaf.

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Adapted from original Backyard Gardener publications by Jeff Schalau, Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Yavapai County

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Other claims say that Aloe vera has healed radiation burns and psoriasis, eased intestinal problems, reduced blood sugar in diabetes, reduced arthritic swelling, curtailed HIV infection, stimulated immune response against cancer, and more. However, other references indicate that Aloe vera sap contains some toxic compounds. I would not advise a person to use Aloe vera to heal anything more than a cut, burn, or insect bite without first consulting their physician. However, I would advise growing Aloe vera as it is one of the easiest plants to grow successfully. It is available in many nurseries and garden centers or simply ask a friend or neighbor for an offset.

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