

## Stapelia Plant

*Stapelia* is a genus of perennial succulent plants from South Africa. It is in the Dogbane Family (Apocynaceae) which is the same plant family as milkweeds. Many species of *Stapelia* are known for having flowers that smell like rotting meat giving them the common name “carrion flower”. A less repellent common name is “starfish flower”. The plants can live for many years without special care.

South Africa is home to many species of succulents and is similar in precipitation and summer temperatures to the southwest deserts of the U.S. However, the maritime influence in South Africa tends to buffer the extreme cold temperatures making the succulents from there more frost tender. Higher elevations of the Mohave, Chihuahuan, and Great Basin deserts can be very cold and regularly experience freezing temperatures. This difference often requires South African succulents to be grown in frost-free areas or as indoor plants for at least a portion of the year.

The *Stapelia gigantea* species only grows about 8 to 10 inches tall and has smooth, erect, light green stems. The large star-shaped, five-petaled, flowers appear on the lower portion of the short plant in late summer and are about 10 inches in diameter. The flowers of *S. gigantea* are yellow with narrow red stripes arranged radially around the petals. The flowers are also fringed with 1/3-inch-long hairs. The flower is said to smell like rotting meat to attract the flies that pollinate it. The smell may be more noticeable if the plant is indoors while flowering.

In the higher elevations of Arizona, *Stapelia* should be grown in a small or medium-sized unglazed, clay pot with a large drainage hole. This pot should be easily moveable to avoid freezing temperatures. Or, it can be kept indoors year round in a bright, sunny location. The potting mix should be appropriate for succulents and cactus. This can be mixed at home using two parts washed sand and one part mineral soil (weed free soil from outdoors). Cuttings should be taken during the active growth phase (summer) and prior to dormancy. Allow the cutting to dry out in a shady location for two weeks before planting. Plant rooted cuttings into the soil mix and water until water drains from the hole in the pot. Use care not to overwater *Stapelia* as it can cause root rot.



Carrion flower in bloom (*Stapelia gigantea*, Jeff Schalau, University of Arizona).

*Stapelia* is not for everyone, but I think many gardeners would like this plant for its uniqueness and ease of care. If the smell becomes too much, simply move the plant outside during the flowering cycle.

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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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