

Delightful Desert Rose

If you want to achieve the style and beauty of old-time Key West in your backyard or on your porch, you can't go wrong with the delightful Desert Rose.

Desert Rose (*Adenium obesum*) is a reliable, salt-tolerant succulent-type plant that thrives in our Key West weather. The blooms are show-stoppers, the swollen stems are interesting and attractive, and the narrow green leaves are pretty even when the plant is not in bloom. It likes to be slightly root-bound, so loves being in a pot. As with succulents, the biggest danger is too much water. There are many hybrids, with the most common colors being red and deep pink. All varieties need a lot of sun - at least six hours per day.



Native to Africa, it actually has little similarity to the rose, except for the stunning flowers. It has no thorns, and is in the milkweed family along with oleander and plumeria. Some desert rose plants have clusters of single flowers and others have beautiful doubles; hybrids can be quite varied. Be careful of the sap, it can be

irritating to some. In its native area sap was often boiled to a paste and applied to arrowheads for hunting large game!

But you will love desert roses. They are very low maintenance and can even live on your porch without care while you are away on vacation. They are great snowbird plants. Just make sure that the soil is well-draining and you give them a lot of sun. Water desert roses once a week in the summer during their growing season, but be sure to let the soil dry out in between. In wintertime you can further reduce the watering as they are semi-dormant then and need to rest. Desert roses will do well—even if you do not consider yourself to have a green thumb and tend to ignore your plants—as long as you don't over-water!

Desert roses can be pruned to promote a fuller plant if that's what you like (do that in spring or summer) or let them grow tall if you prefer that look. When they are younger, they will grow faster, especially if you give them a bit of bloom fertilizer every 2 weeks (lightly!) during growing season.

The part that desert rose enthusiasts like the best is the caudex, which is the lower portion of the trunk that holds water for the plant. A caudex will only grow on a plant grown from seed. The interesting thing is that each seed-grown plant is variable in both growth habit and flower color, even seed from the same parent plant. How exciting, they have personalities!



These 3 plants were all seed-grown from the same Key West Garden Club's desert rose "mother", and show variety in both blooms and leaf shape



pink with white, slight edge ruffle

mostly pink, more ruffled edges

pink with white, very ruffled



To encourage a fat caudex, enthusiasts (<http://www.desertrosesociety.com>) like to pot the desert rose shallowly, with most of the caudex showing above the soil line. When up-potting, use a shallow but strong pot that has at least 2-3 inches of extra space on the sides for root growth. It is also desirable to lift the plant up a bit with each repotting – that makes the caudex grow larger. Desert roses with large caudexes command very high prices.

Desert roses can be propagated via cuttings but the clone will never grow a caudex. Over time, however, the cloned plant's trunk will fatten up, and at least you will be sure of the flower color if it is one you love. Just dab the cutting in some root hormone and plant directly in free-draining soil. Remember not to over-water.

Rather than tucking one into a full, lush garden bed, this plant should be allowed to shine on its own. Try to find a spot where it can work as a small specimen plant...on the deck or porch, by the entry walkway, for instance, or in the small planting area where it can be the star.