We grow plants because we find them attractive, but taste in plants differs widely; some of us like plants with conspicuous flowers, others gravitate towards different groups of plants such as trees, palms or bromeliads. Some become passionate, starting off with common garden plants and then developing a connoisseur’s taste for a certain group as the infectious interest spreads. One group with a devoted band of admirers is the succulents, and beyond their immediate visual appeal, they are admirable survivors, molded by their environments to share one important feature which binds them under the succulent umbrella: the ability to store water. Their fleshy leaves, stems or roots provide water reserves to carry them through the dry season, a decided advantage over non-succulent plants, and these survival adaptations have resulted in a fascinating array of forms. During the past few years I have been documenting succulent plants growing on cliff faces throughout South Africa and Namibia, working toward a book on the subject. Many new species have been discovered and named, and others are in the process of being described.

Cliffs are inherently dry places, so it is no real surprise that succulents make their homes there. Nevertheless, as horticulturalists we often try to grow pendent, sprawling or otherwise messy cliff dwellers in pots to which they are not suited, often because we don’t realize how they live in nature. Luckily, garden situations offer many places (artificial cliffs) where these plants can be well grown and appreciated, and in order to understand the best cultivation methods for these plants, a background knowledge of their native environment is helpful.