

Hen and chicks in the garden



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Question: I planted some hens and chicks a few years ago and was very surprised to see them bloom this summer. I didn't know they actually bloomed. What can you tell me about hens and chicks?

Answer: Hens and chicks, *Sempervivum tectorum*, do sometimes flower on a tall, dramatic looking stalk. This elongated stalk, called a rooster, can be just a few inches high up to a foot high, and when the rooster appears, it signals the death of the flowering rosette below.

Once the blooming has stopped, the mother hen will die and should be removed. The appearance of the rooster is a natural part of the plant's reproductive cycle. This cycle generally occurs about every three to six years, but can occur more frequently if the plant has been stressed by unfavorable growing conditions.

Hens and chicks are one variety of succulents and are native to the mountains of southern Europe and parts of Africa. Succulents are a group of plants with thick, fleshy tissues adapted to water storage. Hens and chicks are drought-tolerant, low-growing perennials that will quickly spread to 2 feet or more.

They are excellent container plants and will grow indoors or outdoors in cool or hot temperatures. Hens and chicks are often found in rock gardens and in between garden stepping stones.

This lovely plant can survive in soil where other plants can't grow.

Hens and chicks are easy to grow. They must have well-drained soil because if they sit in too much water, or get watered too frequently, they will rot. Misting your succulents is not recommended. Generally, they can withstand weeks at a time without watering. However, if you have recently transplanted some little chicks, these will require more water until they are established.

Hens and chicks don't need much fertilizer and actually tolerate poor soils quite well. They do require full sun, at least six hours a day, but will grow just fine in partial shade. The ideal

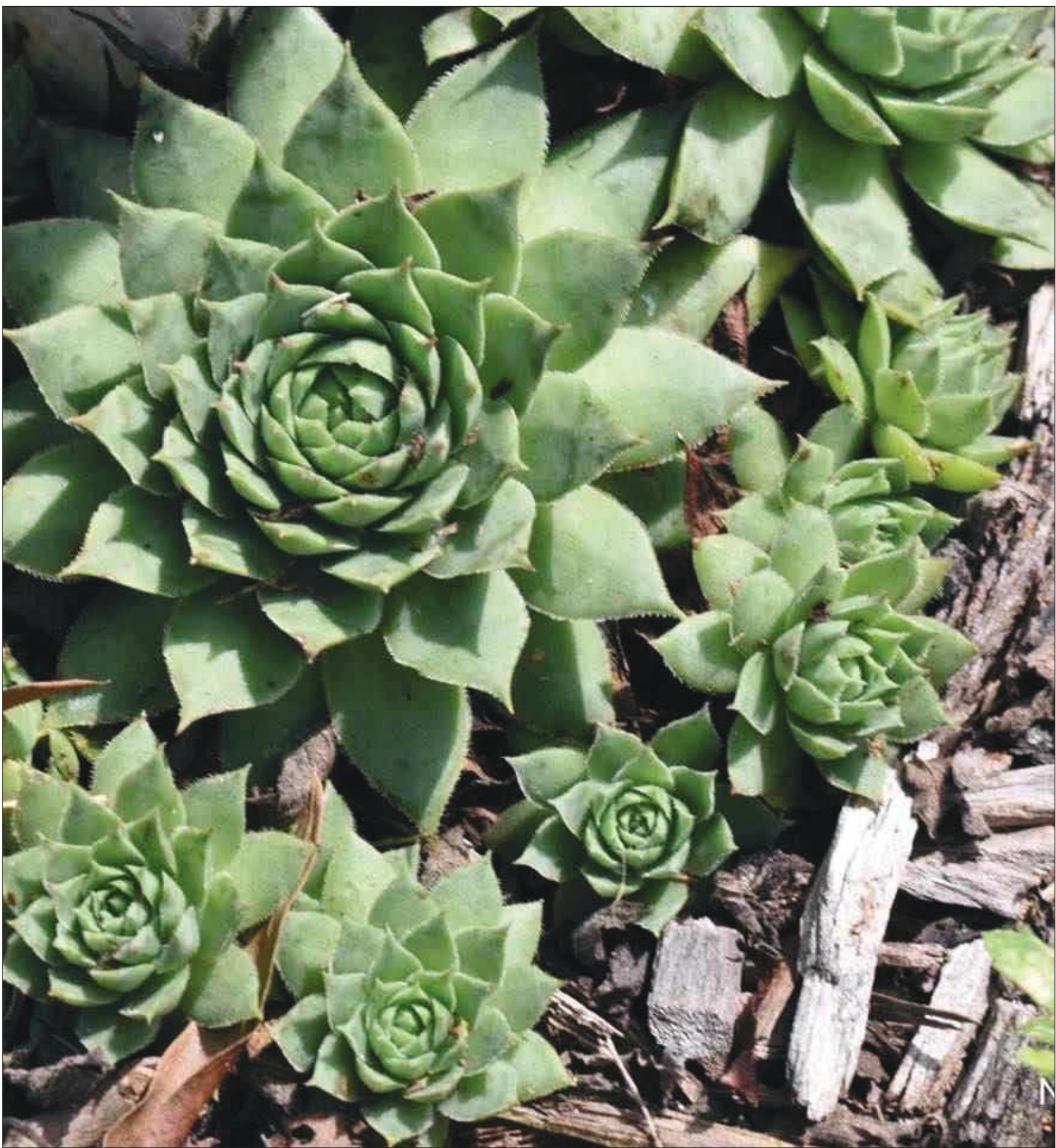


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Parent rosettes are the hens and the smaller rosettes that spring from them are the chicks. They spread by underground roots and each mother hen will produce at least four chicks each growing season.

temperature is between 65-75 degrees. When temperatures are cooler or warmer than the ideal, the plants will become semi-dormant and cease growing.

There is no need to protect these plants in the winter. They will survive a blanket of snow and freezing temperatures in zones 3-8.

Hens and chicks will propagate naturally. Parent rosettes are the hens and the smaller rosettes that spring from them are the chicks. They spread by underground roots and each mother hen will produce at least four chicks each growing season.

These little chicks are called offsets and can be broken off and transplanted. The chicks may be as small as a dime and the mother can be as big as the palm of your hand.

If you are transplanting

the chicks, plant in the spring. Avoid planting during the peak summer heat or late fall. The plants do most of their growing in early fall months and then rest during winter.

Hens and chicks that are grown outdoors are generally left alone by deer and rabbits, but they have been known to eat this plant in the early spring before other vegetation is available.

If you are growing your hens and chicks indoors or in a greenhouse, you may experience problems with mealy bugs and aphids. This is a sure sign that the growing conditions are too moist or that the plants are not getting enough light.

If you end up with an infestation, try to remove the bugs by using a Q-tip soaked in rubbing alcohol. Or just use a strong jet of water to dislodge the pests.

If you would like to

have some variety, consider planting a few different cultivars. Color choices include dark purple tips, frosted grey-green leaves, burgundy leaves with grey-green tips, and my favorite, copper-red tips. You can also find a variety of textures and heights. The color of hens and chicks will change throughout the growing season depending on a variety of environmental factors.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



PHOTO BY LINDA ESTEP

The elongated stalk of the *Sempervivum tectorum* is called a rooster. It can grow from a few inches up to a foot in height.