

Care of Lithops

Lithops is a genus of unusual plants within the ice plant family whose native habitat is Namibia and South Africa. In their natural habitat these plants often survive long periods of drought, frequently 12 – 20 months in duration. Under artificial conditions, however, more care should be taken to ensure flowering and a healthy plant. *Lithops* usually flower in the fall during October and November.

The plant body of *Lithops* is actually two leaves growing opposite each other and united at the base. After flowering, the old leaves are absorbed and completely replaced by two new leaves.

Lithops in the wild grow buried in the soil with only the flattened ends of the leaves exposed. These leaves are usually mottled or spotted to mimic their surroundings, aiding the plant in camouflage against predators.



SOIL: *Lithops* grow best in a well-drained soil mix. Use a mixture of 25% decomposed granite or pumice, 50% compost and 25% sharp sand. Be sure any container used has a drainage hole. Do not put gravel, pottery shards or any other materials for added drainage in the bottom.

WATER: After the plants bloom in October and November, mist every other week. During this time, the old leaves will begin to wrinkle and shrivel. This is not a sign of water stress – they are being absorbed into the new leaves being formed. When the plants begin to actively grow in late spring, increase the water schedule to once a week until the beginning of summer. During the summer, beginning approximately late May, the plants tend to become semi-dormant, but need to be watered every three to four weeks.

LIGHT: In Arizona, *Lithops* should be grown in bright light but not direct sun. At higher elevations, they may require full sun in order to receive adequate light. Plants receiving too much water or not enough light will often grow way out of the soil. Healthy plants are at the level of the soil with only the leaf surface visible.

FERTILIZATION: *Lithops* are light feeders and generally need no fertilization for several years after potting. Fertilizer should be applied in early spring or early fall. Use a low nitrogen, water-soluble fertilizer suitable for houseplants at ½ the recommended concentration.

PROPAGATION: *Lithops* are propagated mainly from seed. Root divisions are possible in some species.

PESTS: They are nearly pest-free, threatened sometimes by mealy bugs or root mealy bugs. Treat them with soapy water or dab with a Q-tip swab dipped in rubbing alcohol. Birds can sometimes be a problem, pecking holes in the leaves.