Aloe barbadensis, Aloe capensis is more commonly known as Aloe vera, or Cape aloe. The Aloe vera plant has been used for thousands of years to heal a variety of conditions, most notably burns, wounds, skin irritations, and constipation. It is grown in most subtropical and tropical locations, including South Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Aloe was one of the most frequently prescribed medicines throughout most of the 18th and 19th centuries and it remains one of the most commonly used herbs in the United States today.

Aloe vera is a perennial, succulent plant (meaning its leaves hold large quantities of water). The plant can grow up to 4 feet tall, and its tough, fleshy, spear like leaves can grow up to 36 inches long. The clear, thick gel found in the inner part of the leaf is most commonly used for minor cuts and burns. Aloe gel is considered safe when applied to the surface of the skin, but should not be applied to open or deep wounds. In rare cases, it may cause an allergic reaction, mainly a skin rash. If you develop a rash, stop using the gel!

Aloe vera is a fairly large plant group with over 180 varietals that range in size from a few inches to the size of a small tree. It is low maintenance, drought tolerant and will grow anywhere that temperatures remain consistently above freezing. It is grown in containers, rockeries, and as an indoor plant.

In keeping with its semi-arid origins, aloe vera grows somewhat low and spreads relative to the ground and throws underground rhizomes to propagate. It prefers loose soil that drains well and with a slightly acidic to neutral pH with the optimal range between 6.5 and 7.

A perennial, aloe vera is hardy in USDA zones 8 through 11 where there are no freezing temperatures. The plant will produce yellow blooms each summer in optimal desert conditions. Outdoors the plant prefers full sun to partial daily shade exposure and when grown as a houseplant requires bright light that is a mix of direct and indirect light.

An aloe plant should be kept in a sunny window. They love the sunlight. After watering your aloe plant, the soil should be allowed to dry completely before watering it again. Outside of its hardiness zones, aloe vera can easily be grown in containers in a succulent potting mix and brought indoors to winter. Aloe is a light feeder but will benefit from a diluted application of a balanced water soluble fertilizer. Apply the formula according to the directions, but cut the dose of fertilizer by half. Pour the solution around the base of the plant and never on the leaves to avoid chemical burn and water spots. You won’t want to miss growing this easy and useful plant!