

### 1 Stonewalling

If your garden needs a retaining wall, then why not forget dinky brickwork and railway sleepers, and go with large rocks instead? The main caveat is that it works best where you are surrounded by crags and mountains – as here in this Paul Broadhurst-designed garden on the shores of Lake Washington – and is not quite as effective in Surrey. You also need to make sure that you employ the services of a very good stonemason.



1 CLAIRE TAKACS, DESIGN PAUL BROADHURST



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### 2 Boulder thinking

For those lucky enough to live near the Mediterranean (or other similarly sunny and dry parts of the world) then this arrangement of succulents, agaves and cactus will work well. However, those of us in damp Britain need not give up as you will get an equally alluring effect with ferns (if in shade) or, obviously, alpine plants.

### 3 Rock of ages

Here are some very large rocks beautifully planted with everything from rhododendrons to alpinas. Admittedly, they had the advantage of not having to actually shift too many rocks as this is the famous Quarry Garden at Belsay Hall in Northumberland. Eleven acres of garden built in the quarry from which the stone for the house was chiselled.



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### 4 High and dry

A good example of what most alpine plants love – good sharp drainage. Wet and soggy feet is a sure way to kill them off and nobody wants that on their conscience – least of all the good folk here at RHS Rosemoor. This is *Silene pusilla* and *Chaenorhinum organifolium* 'Blue Dream'.



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## Rock revival

From a perfectly executed slice of landscape to the contrast between big rocks and small alpine plants, James Alexander-Sinclair delights in rockeries

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR

If one had to think of the horticultural equivalent of the flared loon pant then it would probably be the rockery – if you have no idea what I am talking about then damn you for being so young and full of promise. Gardening, like life, is susceptible to the swaying vagaries of fashion and nothing has fallen so far as the rockery. Time was when every suburban garden had a pile of old stones in which alpines were cosseted and where, occasionally, gnomes cavorted as a homage to the mountains. Often this was just a way of getting rid of some inconvenient stones and the creations had a tendency to look like pet graveyards. Today, outside the gardens of enthusiasts, the alpine garden has been rather forgotten and dwarfed by the excitements of naturalistic borders and jaunty topiary.

Even a century ago the idea of rock gardens was not new – as in so many things the Chinese and Japanese had thought of it many

centuries earlier. Not only thought of it but refined the idea to the nth degree with serenely spiritual arrangements of rock, gravel and plants. We Europeans were Johnny Come Latelies who did not really get on the bandwagon until the late 18th century. People returning from cultural escapades flitting from museum to monastery and from catacomb to caliphate wanted something to remind them of their travels. They had no holiday snaps so had to find something else be it sculptures, paintings or, as in this case, plants. Intrepid (or simply rich) travellers trundled round Europe picking up souvenirs and bringing them back to impress their friends and tenants. These then had to be displayed in a suitably dignified fashion – hence the necessity of a rockery. There were two schools of thought – those who used rocks in an artistic fashion to display specimens or create grottoes and those (like Humphry Repton) who recreated

### 5 Northern rock

Time was when RHS Chelsea Flower Show was full of rock gardens (and rhododendrons) but they had been in short supply until Dan Pearson recreated part of the magnificent Chatsworth Trout Stream in 2015 (for Laurent-Perrier). Three hundred tonnes of prime Derbyshire rocks were shipped down to London to create one of the finest show gardens of recent times.



### 6 Vertical challenge

This is a crevice garden with thin stones stacked vertically leaving little gaps for plants to colonise. Doesn't need a lot of space and can be exquisite but you do need to think a bit about geology and rocks. A load of old leftover tiles doth not the mustard cut.



### 7 Hard choices

Many alpine plants are obligingly happy in pots and containers – most alpine houses have a rotating display of potted plants that are whisked in and out as they reach their crescendoes. Unless you have limitless space, choose plants that look good most of the time rather than ones that spend 51 weeks of the year looking bored.



5 MARIANNE MAJERUS, XXXXXXXX; 6 GAP PHOTOS; 7 NICOLA STOCKEN; 8 GAP PHOTOS; LYNN KEDDIE

Art caption?



### 8 Drop in centre

This garden just shows what you can do with a load of diggers, a bagful of imagination and a bit of drive. This is the Hammock Garden (designed by Raymond Jungles) in Florida, which is a wonderful mixture of the natural (the pond is actually the water table) and unnatural having been dug out and reinforced by lumps of limestone the size of a well-formed moose. It is called Hammock not because it is perfect for a siesta (although it is) but after the nearby, Matheson Hammock Park.

#### Further reading

- **The English Rock-Garden** by Reginald Farrer (London, Jack, 1919). Farrer wrote several books at the height of the rock garden craze. Some – including the above – have been reprinted but ransack a second-hand book shop for others.
  - **Alpines** by Christopher Grey-Wilson (Southwater, 2015).
  - **Rock Gardening** by Joseph Tychonievich (Timber Press, 2016).
- The Alpine Garden Society will tell you everything you want to know. [alpinegardensociety.net](http://alpinegardensociety.net)

▷ naturalistic rockscapes. As time went on these became more extravagant: possibly the apogee of this was the representation of the Matterhorn commissioned by Sir Frank Crisp to adorn his garden at Friar Park in Oxfordshire – later the home of George Harrison who, with his wife Olivia, restored the gardens – and the alpine collection.

Because, being gardeners, all this kerfuffle with rocks served a single purpose: to display plants. An edelweiss or an antennaria can look a bit lost in a border or under a shrubbery. These are plants that thrive on rocky screes or wedged into granite crevices so, basing it on the very sensible maxim of right plant, right place, they tried to recreate their natural habitats. I think this is a good moment for a confession: I once considered alpine plants fussy and annoying. I have even compared alpine enthusiasts to anoraked train spotters. My only excuse is that these were the senseless drivellings of a callow

youth who had yet to fully appreciate the glories of the *Gentian* or the subtle charms of the *Globularia*. Nowadays I find a visit to RHS Wisley incomplete without paying a call to the alpine house. If I might wheel out a slightly jaded cliché – they are like small jewels on the diadem of an empress.

So how can we get some rockery love back into our gardens? Most importantly we must avoid the pile of spoil adorned with broken paving slabs like a streetfighter's teeth. I reckon there are three ways to do this. First there is the vignette approach where you can reproduce a modestly sized, but perfectly executed, piece of landscape: think small but delicate. I was in Vancouver Island recently and there was an exquisite crevice garden, nothing grand but with rocks laid to properly imitate the geological folds of a mountainside and, set in the crevices, a divine selection of alpine

plants each one displayed perfectly and thriving in poor soil and good drainage. This is difficult to do properly requiring not just botany but a bit of geological know how.

The second option is to go for the David and Goliath effect – small plants and big rocks. This is the equivalent of importing your own mountain and the contrast can be extraordinarily effective: flowers that look so delicate and vulnerable are nothing of the kind and can thrive in inhospitable crannies while being battered by gale-force winds. Finally you could do the whole thing in containers – ranging from tufa-covered troughs to gravel-mulched terracotta. This is probably the best solution for those of us with limited space.

Whatever your choices, whatever your taste, there are alpine plants ranging from bulbs to shrubs so there is no excuse. Invest in boulders, grow alpines and let us once more rock the rockery. □

#### Gardens to visit

- **Compton Acres**, 164 Canford Cliffs Road, Poole, Dorset BH13 7ES. Tel 01202 700778, [comptonacres.co.uk](http://comptonacres.co.uk)
- **Cragside**, Rothbury, Morpeth, Northumberland NE65 7PX. Tel 01669 620333, [nationaltrust.org.uk/cragside](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/cragside)
- **Exbury Gardens**, Exbury, Southampton, Hampshire SO45 1AZ. Tel 023 8089 1203, [exbury.co.uk](http://exbury.co.uk)
- **Mount Stuart**, Isle of Bute PA20 9LR. Tel 01700 503877, [mountstuart.com](http://mountstuart.com)
- **Ness Botanic Gardens**, University of Liverpool, Neston Road, Little Neston, Ness, Cheshire CH64 4AY. Tel 0151 795 6300, [nessgardens.org.uk](http://nessgardens.org.uk)
- All the **RHS gardens** have good alpine collections. Wisley in particular has a handsome rockery. [rhs.org.uk/gardens](http://rhs.org.uk/gardens)