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Rock gardens in small spaces are simple to build

It is generally assumed that to have a rock garden and grow alpine plants, you must have a large garden with a sunny slope and light well-drained soil. But even if your garden is small and flat with heavy clay, you can still experience the joy of growing these diminutive plants.

The solution is to make a raised bed—an area four feet wide by eight feet long will allow you to grow dozens of tiny alpines. A raised alpine garden is excellent for seniors who are no longer able to wrestle with huge clumps of daylilies. Someone confined to a wheelchair would also be able to manage this type of garden.

The frame for your raised garden could be made of timbers, which make a convenient sitting place while tending to your plants, or the large, lightweight rocks which do not require a crane to move. Your "soil" is simply filter sand available from most suppliers. This coarse sand, placed on top of clay, solves both the requirements of excellent drainage and available moisture.

You will need to place some stones in your garden to make interesting contours. Grouping several stones together looks natural and provides crevices and pockets to place plants. Remember to keep the natural striation of the rocks running the same way. You could even install a mountain bog by sinking a plastic dishpan out of sight and filling it with half sand and half peat moss.

Alpine plants—those that originate above the tree line on mountains, are short compact plants (from years of being buffeted by winds) and have several distinct shapes—little tufts or buns, such as *armeria juniperifolia* or draba, and flat mats—like thyme or phlox, but always short. One of my favorites is *Veronica filifolia*, which actually cascades down a slope—its blue flowers giving the illusion of a waterfall. You will find these plants at specialist nurseries or from other enthusiasts whom you



Let's Get Growing

Marjorie Mason Hogue

can meet at the Ontario Rock Garden Society.

When planting, remember to open any "pot bound" root balls. Do not plant too deeply—keep the crown of the plant raised above the soil—otherwise, these plants are prone to rotting. After planting, spread a gravel mulch using either a one-quarter-inch crushed stone, or pea gravel, to give it a finished look and to help retain moisture in the root area. Water regularly until the plants are established, and then only during prolonged dry spells. A yearly sprinkling of bonemeal over the stones and then watering in will provide adequate nutrition for most alpines.


If your garden is too small for a new raised bed, you can still know the joy of growing alpines—simply plant a grouping in a shallow planter with drainage holes, following the instructions given above. Place the planter in an unheated garage from November to the beginning of April.

When you return it to the outdoors, water well and it will return to life.

Every garden has its own set of challenges. If your garden is too shady, I will be presenting a free seminar on Saturday, June 7 at 10 a.m. on "Plants for the Shade Garden." For directions, call 649-3532.

Send your comments or questions to: Let's Get Growing, c/o The Tribune, 88 Brock St. W, Uxbridge, ON L9P 1R4.

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