



Why not a rock garden?



What surrounds your home is just as important as what is in it. However, the area around your house is often the last to receive design attention.

Outside spaces benefit from the same attention to detail as any room in your house. A well-designed landscape will complement your home's architecture and design, and increase its value.

Good garden design starts with knowing how you plan to use your yard. Ask yourself what your purpose is for making a garden.

The most obvious reason would be to fill the outdoor space. But other factors might enter into your design planning: drainage, noise reduction, food production, animals, privacy, exercise, habitat for birds and beneficial insects, or in times like these, to save water.

What type of garden would you like? Expanses of green lawn are beautiful, but serve very little purpose and use lots of expensive water.

A more sustainable use of your land might include choosing another type of garden such as vegetables or orchard in an edible landscape. You could create animal-friendly areas, a flower garden, or rock gardens.

There is also the option of hardscape that includes paths, pools, patios, ponds and playgrounds.

DESIGNING ROCK GARDENS

A rock garden is a good way to make an interesting area that requires less water and maintenance while creating a place that attracts beneficial insects, birds, and wildlife. Before beginning a rock garden, decide where it will be situated. Evaluate your site for: (1) drainage (2) elevation (3) availability of rocks (4) soil (5) existing landscape (6) water.

Once a site has been chosen and evaluated, decide on the style that is appropriate for your area. A rock garden can be a major feature of your garden, be it on a small or grand scale.

Some homeowners design rock gardens to exploit rocky slopes in their yards. Others import rocks into yards that are flat and barren of stones.

When designing your garden, consider how color, form and texture will create a style. Motifs can be tropical, desert-like, woodland, cottage, country or Asian.

To excavate the site, choose the exact area of your rock garden and section it off with a garden hose, a post and string, or chalk paint.

Next, get rid of the existing vegetation. Site clearing options include digging down a foot or more to get rid of all the remaining weeds and roots. This is very labor-intensive.

You can use newspapers, cardboard and mulch to cover the area. The grass will die without the sunlight. You could also use solarization or weed killer or any combination of these.

Pebbles, stones, and rocks are considered mulch since they control weeds, maintain soil moisture, and add beauty to the landscape.

They are considered permanent mulch because they don't need to be replenished regularly and neither fly off nor float away.

Applied in a thick layer, stone is good at controlling weeds. Wood may be cheap compared to stone mulch, but you will need to replenish wood mulch over time. Stones are excellent at giving landscapes a bold design element.

When selecting the stones, you should choose rocks that are native to your area or stone that will complement the architecture of your buildings.

Use a variety of sizes from boulders to gravel. Boulders should be placed at varying heights.

About one third of a large rock should be buried in the soil. Position the rocks to control soil erosion and to allow soil pockets of various sizes for plants.

Create height by using rubble (gravel, broken pots, bricks, broken cement), soil, sand, or mulch.

Add soil and let it be.

A well-constructed rock garden will provide many different habitats for your plants. Rain and irrigation will cause the rocks and soil to settle. Crevices and valleys will be created.

After your rock garden has settled, it is time to add plants. They should be the most successful plants for your climate and meet your sun, water, and temperature requirements to thrive. Plants in each "zone" of your yard should have similar water, soil, and light requirements.

PLANT A VARIETY

Perennials are common in rock gardens, but just as in other areas of the yard, annuals can bring an extra punch of color to a rocky site. Stick with plants that complement the garden style you have chosen.

Plants that are low-growing and have a clumping habit are preferred. They should exhibit some variation in height, color, and leaf texture.

Too many different kinds of plants will make the space look too busy.

Planting a variety of species and repeating some species several times will make your garden look natural. Those of freer growth and more generous bloom can be effectively used for mass plantings.

As you plant, add more rocks, but take care not to over-plant.

When mature, plants should still fit into the rock garden.

SPREAD SLOWLY

Why cultivate a rock garden? They're low-maintenance. They're in season all year round. They add variety to the landscape. Need another reason? They can be very drought tolerant.

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