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Rock gardens

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Quick Facts

Rock gardens should be built on a natural slope or terrace.

Rocks of one geological type should be used.

Good drainage is necessary.

A variety of species should be planted in the rockery.

The garden should not be larger than can be easily maintained.

The ideal location for a rock garden is a natural slope or terrace frequently found at the side or rear of houses that have been based on a split-level or garden-level design.

It is preferable to use rocks of one geological type. The best rock source in Colorado is the native granite covered with lichens (moss rock).

An effective rock garden should have many large rocks, some weighing 200 pounds or heavier. Rocks are available from nurseries, landscape contractors and rock dealers.

The rock should be set into the ground so at least one-third is buried. Rocks should be placed in a natural way, following the "grain" of the rock. Rocks should be positioned to control soil erosion between rocks and to allow soil pockets of various sizes for plants. Lichen-covered rock should be

placed to expose as much of the lichen as possible.

Good drainage must be provided. Most plants suitable for rock gardens require a well-drained soil. Organic matter and sharp sand should be incorporated in heavier clay soils to provide better drainage.

The rock garden should be no larger than can be easily maintained. Rock gardens have high maintenance requirements. Weed control is the biggest problem.

A variety of plant species should be planted in the rock garden, repeating some of the species several times to make the garden look natural.

Most plants for rock gardens spread readily. Care should be taken not to overplant.

Plant Selection

Many types of plants are suitable for rock gardens. Generally, plants that are low growing and have a spreading habit are preferred. Perennial and biennial plants generally are used, although annuals are useful in the beginning rock garden.

Two large groups of plants, the sedums and the sempervivums (hen and chick), provide many species that are suitable for rock gardens. Table 1 lists many useful rock garden plants, their characteristics and cultural requirements. This is not a complete list, but it does include those species of plants that are suitable for rock gardens in Colorado.

¹James R. Feucht, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension landscape plants specialist and professor, horticulture (11/88)

Table 1: Recommended rock garden plants.

Botanical and common names	Height	Exposure	Soil preference	Flower color	Bloom period
<i>Aethionema pulchellum</i> Stonecrest	12 in.	sun	dry, sandy	pink-red	May
<i>Ajuga reptans</i> Curly bulge	foliage prostrate flowers to 12 in.	shady spots	well-drained	blue	* May-June
<i>Alyssum saxatile</i> Goldentuft	8-10 in.	sun	dry-rocky	yellow	April-May
<i>Alyssum montanum</i> Mountain alyssum	2-3 in.	sun	dry, rocky	yellow	April-May

Table 1: Recommended rock garden plants. (Continued)

Botanical and common names	Height	Exposure	Soil preference	Flower color	Bloom period
<i>Arabis alpina</i> Alpine rockcress	6 in.	sun	dry, rocky poor soils	white	April-May
<i>Armeria maritima</i> Thrift	foliage to 4 in. flowers to 10 in.	sun	dry, well- drained soils	pink	May-June
<i>Arenaria verna caespitosa</i> Moss sandwort	1-3 in.	sun or light shade	well-drained, poor soils	whitish purple	May
<i>Campanula carpatica</i> Carpathian harebell	8-12 in.	sun or partial	well-drained	blue-white	June to frost
<i>Euphorbia</i> species Spurge**	variable to 12 in.	sun	most soil well- drained	yellow, green- ish yellows	variable usually spring
<i>Euonymus fortunei</i> Wintercreeper euonymus	6-8 in.	sun or shade, protect	rich soils	whitish	June
<i>Iberis sempervirens</i> Candytuft	12 in.	shade, part sun	rich	white	May-June
<i>Lonicera japonica</i> 'Halls' Halls Japanese honeysuckle	prostrate but indefinite	sun or shade	most well- drained soils	white, change to yellow	summer
<i>Sedum</i> species Stonecrops	variable 1-15 in.	sun	most soils, thrives on poor soil	white, yellow, pink	variable
<i>Sempervivum</i> species Houseleek	variable 2-12 in.	sun	most soils, thrives on poor soil	variable	variable
<i>Thymus serpyllum</i> Mother-of-thyme	6 in.	partial shade or sun	acid, poor soils	lilac-rose	late May to early June
<i>Caragana microphylla</i> Littleleaf peashrub	3-4 ft.	sun	most soils	yellow	June
<i>Cotoneaster horizontalis</i> Rock cotoneaster	2-3 ft.	sun or partial shade	most soils	pinkish (not showy)	June
<i>Potentilla fruticosa</i> <i>farreri</i> Farrer cinquefoil	8-12 in.	sun	most well- drained soils, tolerates poor, dry soils	yellow (white vars.)	mid-May and summer
<i>Juniperus communis</i> Rocky Mountain juniper	12-18 in.	sun or shade	well-drained prefers acid soil		
<i>Cerastium tomentosum</i> Snow-in-summer	4-6 in.	sun	dry, well- drained	white	June
<i>Dianthus deltoides</i> Maiden pink	foliage 5-6 in. flowers 10 in.	sun	well-drained rich soil	reds, white	May, often again in fall
<i>Dianthus plumarius</i> Cottage pink or grass pink	foliage 6 in. flowers 12 in.	sun	well-drained rich soils	reds, pink- variegated	May-June
<i>Epimedium alpinum</i> Alpine epimedium	8-12 in.	shade	rich, cool, high in humus	creamy white	May
<i>Heuchera sanguinea</i> Coralbell	foliage 6 in. flowers 18 in.	sun	well-drained, rich	red, pink, white	June-Sept.
<i>Phlox subulata</i> Moss pink or Creeping phlox	6-8 in.	sun	well-drained, rich	pink, white, lavender	April-May
<i>Potentilla aurea</i> Golden cinquefoil	4-6 in.	sun	dry, stony	golden yellow	April-Sept.
<i>Primula</i> species Primrose	6-10 in.	shade or part sun	rich, high in humus	various	April
<i>Saponaria ocymoides</i> Rock soapwort	9-10 in.	sun	sandy, well- drained soil	pink	May-June
<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i> Kinnikinnick	6-8 in.	shade or partial sun	acid, high in humus, well- drained	white-tinged red	May-June
<i>Caluna vulgaris</i> Heather	12 in.	sun or partial shade	dry, sandy	light purple	late summer
<i>Juniperus horizontalis</i> Creeping juniper	6-15 in.	sun	well-drained, most soils		
<i>Juniperus squamata</i> <i>prostrata</i> , Prostrate Single- seed juniper	8-10 in.	sun	most soils		

*A poor soil is one that is low in organic matter. A rich soil is one that is easily cultivated, dark in color and with a good proportion of organic matter.

**Do not use Cypress Spurge (*Euphorbia Cyparissias*) because of its potential to escape as a weed in pastures and rangelands.