Rock Garden Basics

Rock gardening or miniature landscapes can be designed to harmonize with surrounding forests, meadows, and woodlands. Rock gardens that include Xeriscape plants are low maintenance and require little watering, if any, once established. Many native plants are considered Xeric and these plants stand the best chance of surviving GVM's harsh and dry environment, often accompanied by desiccating winds.

Four elements define rock gardens:

Site: In their natural habitats, many rock plants grow in exposed locations but will thrive in a site that gets full sun—especially in the mountains. Most also grow well in a spot that gets filtered afternoon shade from high-branching trees. Rock gardens don't need to be large to be effective. In fact, these plants can be grown in a few square feet of ground.

Rock: Rock is the main element that ties everything together visually and contrasts well with the living detail of plants. Some of the best rock gardens mimic natural outcroppings. In most rock gardens, stone makes up 10 to 40 percent of the visible landscape. Rocks should be of different sizes of preferably just one type of stone (e.g., moss rock). Large rocks or boulders should be dug into place before planting and soil filled in as rocks are placed. For the most natural effect, at least one third (or more) of each rock should be buried with the top of the rock left showing. Smaller rocks can be used to create microclimates. Rocks retain and release heat; choose plants that are hearty and heat loving for these sites.

Plants: A mix of shrubs, perrenials, and ground covers that contrasts color, size, and texture provides the most interesting palette. Bloom time is also an important consideration. Evergreen plants (e.g., dwarf conifers such as juniper, pine, spruce) can form a useful backdrop to anchor the overall design. As for rock plants, there is a wide selection of perennials, including ground covers (creeping Turkish veronica, creeping potentilla, pussytoes, thyme, sedum, and sempervivum (hens and chicks). Sedums—upright and trailing—offer a beautiful and interesting tapestry of texture and leaf color ranging from green, blue-green, silver gray, to burgundy with blooms of yellow, light pink, and rose. Most of these hardy plants bloom in spring or fall and are deer and rabbit resistant. Thymes can be useful planted in the seams between stone steps or pavers on paths or patios; their silvery gray leaves release a subtle fragrance underfoot. Bulbs might also be considered for spring blooming. Deer enjoy tulips but not daffodils and they tend to leave iris alone, although screening newly emerging growth can be beneficial. There are also commercial deer and rabbit repellants available that are effective for newly planted perennials.

Wildflowers also provide a natural ambiance to the rock garden, although they can be difficult to grow or to transplant. Some of the hardiest and prettiest grow in scree and would die if transplanted into normal or amended garden soil, but they can flourish in a fast-draining mix of soil, sand, and rock mulch. (Tip: Transplant wildflowers in early spring before blooms appear. Dig up one square foot or more of the specimen along with its roots and place intact into its new location, replicating soil composition and exposure. Be sure to water newly transplanted vegetation.

Most rock plants need well-drained soil. A mix of equal parts of native soil (or compost or garden soil, but *not* potting soil), sand, and gravel (3/8") followed by a top dressing of pea gravel (mauve and gray tones are the least conspicuous) provide a fast-draining mix that lets rock plants retain sufficient moisture yet drain surplus spring runoff without causing constantly wet soil conditions, which lead to root rot and death.

Water: Any new vegetation, including Xeric, needs to be watered the first season until established. Thereafter, little if any supplemental water other than what Mother Nature provides should be needed, although infrequent, deep watering might be necessary if the summer is unusually hot and dry.

The GVM Demonstration Garden displays primarily native plants. An updated plant ID guide is available in the information box at the garden along with a Resources List that includes native plant websites.