

CREATING A ROCKERY

• **MATERIALS:** A rockery is intended to give the appearance of a rock outcrop that would be found in a mountainous region. The site chosen is important and a bank is ideal, as building up from a level surface seldom achieves a natural effect. The use of a natural or imitation rock stone rather than broken concrete or old bricks is preferable. It is best to use one type of rock, choosing the largest pieces you can comfortably handle, although some smaller pieces will help the final natural effect. Your garden retailer will have a range of different rocks to choose from – both natural and possibly artificial, and from local or other areas.

• **BUILDING THE ROCKERY:** When planning how to position the rocks, consider how they would appear in nature. Try and copy this natural look when building the rockery. Create pockets of suitable planting soil for the plants. Each rock will have at least one attractive 'face' and this should be positioned to show well when the rock is put into position.

Bury the base of the rock into the soil and slope it back to help direct rain into the planting pockets. To add interest, vary the soil spaces between the rocks.

• **SUITABLE PLANTS:** Most alpinists will tolerate any type of soil, providing it is well drained; but avoid lime haters such as gentians and *Cassiope* if you do not have acid soil. In addition to alpine or rockery plants, many bulbs work well in rockery planting and some dwarf shrubs and conifers are suitable for rockeries. Spread the season of interest and colour over the year. Make sure the plants you choose will not grow too large for your rock garden.

• **AFTERCARE:** Once the rockery is planted, cover the soil surface with small gauge gravel or shingle to enhance the natural look and keep the soil cool. Although many alpine plants grow on very poor soils, always water after planting and in very dry spells. Feed in spring with a general fertiliser at just ¼ of the strength that the manufacturer recommends for other plants to ensure best results.



WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Fork & spade
- Trowel
- Secateurs
- Alpine plants
- General fertiliser
- Grit, sand, pea shingle, rock chips or sharp sand

- For the rockery:
- Barrow or truck to move stone
 - Gloves
 - Rocks of your choice
 - Gravel or shingle

- For more information:
- www.rhs.org.uk/advice
 - www.plantforlife.info
 - www.alpinegardensociety.net

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THE EASY GUIDE TO GROWING ALPINES



Photography: Tim Sandall/*The Garden*

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WHAT IS AN ALPINE?

ALPINES: These are plants found in high mountainous areas generally above the natural tree line. In their native habitat they are exposed to wide temperature ranges: very freely draining, low-nutrient soils; strong winds and high light levels. To survive these conditions they have evolved a number of defences - because they are low-growing, mat- or cushion-forming plants, they are protected against harsh winds and cold; they are dormant under snow; they have extensive root systems to seek out moisture and nutrients; and they often have spiny growths to deter grazing animals. These extreme conditions are different from a British winter, but provided you bear in mind their natural growing conditions and give them a very well-drained soil, many alpine plants are easy to grow.

ROCK GARDEN PLANTS: Rock garden plants consist of any slow-growing, small or miniature forms of perennials, conifers, shrubs and bulbs.

While they do not necessarily come from alpine regions, they also need free-draining soil and are ideal companions for true alpine plants.

HOW TO GROW THEM: These dwarf plants offer a huge choice of flower colour, and also of overall shape, foliage and a diversity of usage.

- Growing alpine plants on a rockery can achieve spectacular displays with the colour and form of the plant complementing the bulk of the rock.
- They also make good container plants on the patio and can look superb in old sinks and troughs and raised beds.
- Some will grow successfully in hanging baskets and in crevices or pockets in dry stone walls and between paving stones.
- Plants such as thyme can be planted *en masse* to give colourful and scented carpets.

ALPINES IN CONTAINERS

Alpines can live in containers for many years and dwarf types especially benefit from being displayed in raised sinks or troughs so that their minute detail can be better appreciated. Smaller containers will need holes in the base to let excess water drain off; do not provide a saucer. Deeper pots provide better drainage and root growth, but are heavy to move.



Always place a layer of broken crocks in the base to help with drainage and ensure roots never sit in water. Provide a planting mix of 30% general-purpose compost, 30% leafmould or garden compost; and 40% added grit. Top dress with gravel and place in a sunny spot. Water regularly but not excessively - the compost should be damp not soggy; keep alpine plants even drier in winter, but don't let plants dry out. Feed in mid-spring with a general fertiliser at ¼ of the recommended strength for other plants.

Keep free from weeds, mosses and liverworts, pick off any dead leaves, deadhead and prune as required. Move pots to a cool, well-ventilated greenhouse in winter or place a sheet of glass over the top (see winter protection, right).

RECOMMENDED PLANTS

There is an enormous choice of plants, with alpine plants available for most soil conditions. Many of them prefer alkaline soils, but gentians hate lime and require acid soils. If you are growing them in pots you can adapt your planting mix to suit. When choosing plants, most will be low-growing, but always check the label. The ultimate spread also varies - many can cover several square metres and swamp less invasive types.

Andromeda - evergreen dwarf shrub with narrow blue-grey leaves and small pink flowers
Cassiope - ericaceous evergreen with delicate white bells in May
Chionohebe pulvinaris - tiny, stemless white flowers
Daphne retusa - dwarf evergreen with scented flowers in spring and orange autumn berries
Draba - yellow or white flowers
Gentiana acaulis - large deep blue trumpets in late spring
Gentiana sino-ornata - trumpets in shades of blue from Sept-Dec
Gentiana verna - electric blue star-shaped flowers in April-May
Juniperus communis 'Compressa' - slow-growing grey-green conifer ideal for rock gardens
Kabschia saxifraga - pink, yellow, white, peach & red spring flowers
Polygala - mats of purple/yellow, yellow/white or blue flowers
Primula auricula - sweetly scented

in a range of colours
Primula marginata - silver-leaved rosette with pale lavender flowers
Primula minima - bright purple/pink primrose flowers nestling on foliage
dwarf rhododendron in all shapes, sizes and flower colours
Saxifraga 'Silver Cushion' - pink flowers in May-June; silver foliage
Sedum album 'Coral Carpet' - white flowers in June & July over bronzy older leaves
Sedum spathulifolium 'Cape Blanco' yellow flowers in June on silvery rosettes of evergreen leaves
Sempervivum - coloured rosettes of foliage and dainty pink, white or yellow flowers
Thymus x citrodorus 'Archer's Gold' - dainty, aromatic golden foliage, pink and white flowers in June and July
Sorbus reducta dwarf rowan with



AUTUMN GENTIAN



PRIMULA AURICULA

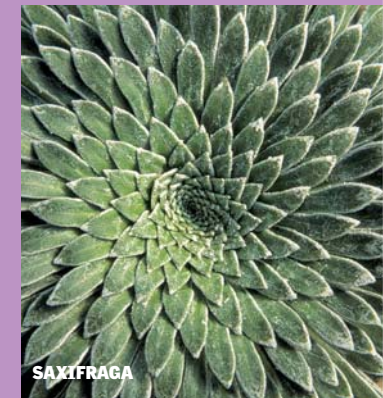


CYCLAMEN COUM

spreading habit, bright pink berries, autumn leaf colour
Viola - hardy plants giving a splash of colour in winter.

Bulbous alpine plants

Colchicum - mauve, pink or white crocus-like flowers in autumn
Corydalis solida - white, blue, red, yellow or pink flowers in Feb-April



SAXIFRAGA

Crocus - white, blue, mauve or yellow flowers in Sep-March
Cyclamen coum - magenta-white flowers in Dec-March
Cyclamen hederifolium - pink or white flowers in Aug-Sep
Iris reticulata - blue, purple & yellow flowers in Jan-March
Narcissus bulbicodium - miniature golden daffodils.

GROWING ALPINES

- **Soil preparation:** all areas to be planted should be well dug and must be freely draining. On heavy or wet soils add liberal amounts of sharp sand or grit to improve drainage and prevent plants from 'suffocating' or rotting during periods of heavy rain and ensure that roots are insulated from penetrating frosts.
- **Moisture retention:** applying a layer of rock chips, grit sand or small gauge gravel over the soil looks more natural and aids moisture retention. It will also reduce the possibility of root damage by winter cold.
- **Watering & feeding:** while establishing and during dry periods, all plants require watering, but try to water around the edge of the plant and not in the centre, as many dislike direct watering onto their foliage. Most alpine plants do not need additional fertiliser, but if plants stop growing, apply a general fertiliser at quarter-strength in mid spring. This will normally supply all they require for the rest of the year.

- **Weed eradication:** weeds are an arch enemy of alpine plants, and once they become established among the tiny plants they are almost impossible to eradicate. Make sure weeds such as couch grass (twitch), ground elder, bindweed, docks and dandelions are eradicated before planting.
- **Winter protection:** Full sun is important but this also exposes the plants to winter cold - and more importantly winter wet. A few may require protection in the worst months of winter, especially those with grey, woolly foliage. Cover plants with a cloche or sheet of glass on pegs to raise it off the foliage.
- **Pruning:** Most carpet-forming types such as *Aurinia* (alysseum), *Aubrieta*, *Iberis* (perennial candytuft), *Saponaria* (rock soap wort), *Thymus* (thyme) and *Veronica* (speedwell) respond well to a 'short top and sides' after flowering. The easiest way to achieve this is to place a dinner or tea plate, depending on the size of the plant, on top of the plant and cut back any protruding growth. Remove the plate and trim the top by approximately 25%.