



Gardening with Rocks

Gary Westlake

We just got in from gardening on Bucket Hill and I am reminded how much our garden on the hill is defined by its rocks. We call the steepest part of our garden Bucket Hill because everything going in and out of it gets carried in a bucket. This where we built the rock garden and waterfall.

It is a good thing that we like rocks because we live on a hill of rock dumped by some glacier along time ago. There are rocks of all sizes from large gravel to one I tried to dig around that is probably as big as the house.

As often happens when gardeners get involved, much of our garden replaced a large lawn, and in the middle of this lawn, we found a bare patch where the grass would not grow. Digging revealed a granite bolder and, of course, we wanted it for our garden. We dug a pit around it and hollowed out a spot under it to fit a jack. By jacking up one side and dumping smaller rocks under it, then lifting the other side and repeating this process over and over we slowly outsmarted the rock out of the ground. We found others and did the same and now these boulders make wonderful focal points.

On the steep part of the hill, there were exposed rocks to hold the soil but we moved them around and took more from other places to build a rock garden. One day, as I was moving rocks around the hill, one particularly large one tried to make its getaway and thundered down the hill and across the lawn. It only missed squishing our poor little dog by a couple of feet. Of course, this was a one way trip for the rock and we found a place for it at the bottom of the garden.

We added paths and steps and a small deck. In another garden we visited, we found something the gardeners called a belvedere which was perched on the side of a hill overlooking a wonderful garden. The word "belvedere" derives from Latin words meaning 'beautiful' and 'view'. Part way up the hill, we piled rocks to make a flat part and put a railing around it. Our belvedere also has a great view.

We rebuilt a small waterfall into a larger one that now goes from the top to the bottom of the rock garden. It is built from overlapping sheets of rubber covered with rocks. The size of it is a bit crazy, and the sound sometimes wakes us up at night, but I cannot imagine our garden without Westlake Falls.

At one end of the rock garden, we dug a bit of the hill away and filled it a foot deep with pea gravel. This became a scree garden. Some plants grow well in this gravel without soil, when they would rot anywhere else in the garden.

At the bottom of the hill, we stacked rocks around an area and lined it with a plastic sheet covered with soil. We poked the sheet in a few places but for the most part it holds water so we can grow bog plants.

Almost any plant that does not mind dry conditions can be used in most rock gardens. Short plants that form mounds or mats like creeping phlox or the short sedums are the popular choices. Hens and

chickens (Sempervivum) and species tulips are also good rock garden plants. Plants that are tolerant of low moisture are common also because rock gardens usually have excellent drainage and sometimes have very dry soil. But, the occasional tall plant acts like punctuation. We have some Lupin and Verbascum that look great as long as there are not too many. I like the short Sedum 'Angelina' and Greek Oregano. Irises are great in a rock garden because they like it 'high and dry'. Alpine plants usually need a rock garden to survive.

You may not have a hill like we do but you can still have a rock garden. A mound or pile of rocks placed in a flat garden can work very well. You can even build wonderful ones in miniature in troughs and these can do just fine on a balcony or deck.

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