

Al Wurster Memorial Rock Garden

The Al Wurster Memorial Rock Garden was built by the Adirondack Chapter of the North American Rock Garden Society (NARGS) in 2000 and 2001 and this local all-volunteer group continue to maintain it, with the help of Master Gardener Volunteers as well. It is named as a memorial tribute to Al Wurster, a gardener's gardener with eclectic interests and an unparalleled generosity in sharing plants and knowledge. Additionally, he was engaged in virtually every gardening organization in the area, including the Master Gardener Volunteers, the Liberty Hyde Bailey Garden Club, and the local Adirondack NARGS Chapter.

What makes this a rock garden? For sure there are lots of rocks which provide the bones of the garden. Beyond the aesthetics of their placement, the stone is there to serve the plants in a number of ways, for example, to provide micro-climates of sun or shade or to keep the crown of the plants cool while directing water down to the roots. If you haven't noticed, most plants love to grow near rocks.

The design of this garden uses the rock to demonstrate five different types of rock garden construction: English, crevice, Czech crevice, sandbed (no rock at all), and the wall. At the crest, a bog environment was created. Later, a hypertufa trough (a concrete planter that can withstand outdoor weather) was added to create a container rock garden. The latter is a good first step for anyone interested in getting started with rock garden plants.

While rocks form the structure, the true stars of the garden are the plants, carefully selected for their small size. Lots of plants can fit into a small space, making this type of garden ideal for small properties. Many plants you will find in Wurster are smaller species of familiar genera such as phlox or dianthus. But some plants are less well-known like Androsace or Saxifraga, that are considered classic for the rock garden. Local nurseries will offer a few suitable plants (those of small stature being the primary criteria). In the search for suitable plants, they are often sourced from specialty mail order nurseries or through seed exchanges.

The growing medium for a rock garden differs from the rich soils we desire for a traditional flower border. Most rock garden plants require sharp drainage and a long root run. To meet these criteria, constructing a rock garden generally requires modifying the planting area. Build depth by creating height as in this garden and remove the native soil, which locally is often heavy clay. The soil should be lean or simply replace the soil with coarse builders' sand. The Wurster garden was built in several layers – starting with a base of coarse gravel, a layer of compost/sand mix and finally, a top layer of sand and placed stones.

On site at the garden, there's a brochure rack that includes more information about the construction and the plants. If you are interested in growing a rock garden, a good start is to connect with other rock gardeners through the local Adirondack Chapter of NARGS (acnargs.org or the QR Code at the left). Easier still, simply come enjoy the Wurster

CCE Tompkins Garden Post, May 2023

Rock Garden any time. Peak bloom is between mid-May to early June but there is interest throughout the growing season, even in winter.