



Cool plants for rock gardens™

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All about Rock Gardens

Troughs and Containers

Gardening in containers makes it possible to grow Rock Stars® in places where there isn't even any soil, such as on a balcony, patio or deck. In fact, using containers of alpines in leisure areas is a terrific idea, since the little plants are easily viewed from a comfortable height, and they have so many interesting features when seen close up.

When it comes to gardening, caring for an alpine container is about the easiest thing possible. It's just a matter of keeping it regularly watered, but since the plants are tough and relatively forgiving, if you happen to forget for a day or two it should be no problem. These containers won't dry out nearly as fast as a hanging basket or a window box, and if they do get too dry the plants are better able to cope compared to the usual range of annual container plants. Other required tasks are only occasional, and we list these in detail below.

Alpine Troughs

Traditionally these were discarded stone or cement cattle troughs, filled with a well-drained soil mix and used to create gorgeous little miniature gardens. Nowadays there are ready-made concrete, stone or stone look-alike containers that are perfect, in a wide range of sizes.



Stone Troughs

You can also make your own trough, using a special cement mixture known as hyper tufa. There are many recipes for hyper tufa and instructions on how to mould containers, easiest to find by doing a web search on the words: *hyper tufa trough recipe*.



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Other Kinds of Containers

Almost anything that will hold soil and has adequate drainage may be pressed into service, so let your imagination run wild. Wooden boxes, wicker baskets lined with sheet moss, metal, terracotta, fibreglass or plastic pots all have possibilities. Particularly great (and inexpensive) are terracotta clay chimney-flue liners,



Hypertufa

available in various lengths, shapes and widths from building supply stores. Group three or four of these in various sizes together, fill with soil and you have an instant alpine garden in a very tiny space.

If whimsical gardens are up your alley, consider taking some unusual objects and pressing these into service as containers – anything from a dog bowl to an old pair of boots or a hat, for instance. Keep an eye out for antique parts from farm equipment or industrial machines. Discarded objects like old barbeques or antique sinks can be great finds when it comes to using Rock Stars® to make your garden interesting and personal. See our [Wild and Whacky](#) page listed under Rock Garden Styles for even more offbeat ideas.

Container Soil

Once you have a container, drill drainage holes if there are none. Fill with a mix of:

- 50% bagged commercial potting soil
- 25% perlite or granite chicken/turkey grit (available at feed stores)
- 25% bagged compost or loamy garden soil

No additional fertilizer should be required for the first season. Place and plant your Rock Stars®, add a decorative rock or two and mulch the soil surface with decorative gravel and water well.



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Selecting Plants for an Alpine Trough

As a general guide, **choose plants rated at least a hardiness zone or **two colder**** than where you live. If you live in Zone 5, for instance, then select Rock Stars® with a hardiness range of at least Zones 4 to 9. When perennials are growing in containers, their roots are subjected to more extreme cold temperatures than those growing directly in the ground, so you want to choose some tough plants.



Add interest with shapes, size and colour.

Think of your trough as being a miniature landscape, and let that guide you when selecting plants. Aim to build a little collection of plants with different forms or shapes. We group Rock Stars® into six distinctive shapes. See our page called Right Plant, Right Place for more ideas on selecting different shapes and plants with a similar rate of growth. It's also wise to select plants for your trough with different seasons of bloom, so that you can enjoy flower colour over an extended season.

Various kinds of dwarf conifers are readily available at nurseries, and many of these slow-growing evergreens are ideal for combining with Rock Stars® to create a miniature landscape, whether in containers or in the rock garden. They provide good height and structure to compliment lower-growing alpines, as well as giving interest during the winter months.

Watering your Container

Because the surface gravel will always look the same, we suggest checking how dry your trough is by poking your finger into the soil. A small trough may need water almost every day during the warm part of summer, a larger trough about three times a week, as a general guide. Because the soil mix is so well drained, alpine troughs are fairly forgiving of being over watered so long as there are adequate drain holes to get rid of any excess water.



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Fertilizing Containers

By the second season, any nutrients in the container soil mix will pretty much have been used up. We recommend using a slow-release container fertilizer, the type designed for hanging baskets and window boxes, but at half the rate on the product label. In early spring, sprinkle this on the surface of the gravel mulch evenly, using your fingers to brush the granules off of any plant foliage. Each time you water, the slow release fertilizer will feed your plants and this should provide enough nutrients for the entire growing season.

Overwintering Your Container

If you begin by choosing plants rated a zone or two hardier than your region, there will be fewer problems with losing plants over the winter months. There are four basic overwintering methods to consider:

- **Leave your containers outside.** Try to group them into one area that is out of the prevailing winds and sheltered by a hedge or building. Piling snow on top during the winter is a good idea, to offer some extra protection, but we do not recommend a mulch of leaves, straw or hay because this could easily smother and rot many of your alpine plants. Water the containers one last time in very late fall, just as your soil begins to freeze, then leave them alone until spring. Mice, other rodents and rabbits really love to eat *Dianthus* of all types, and occasionally *Armeria*, *Phlox* and some other alpines. If this becomes a problem, consider overwintering the trough in a garage or shed instead. One consideration with this method: concrete troughs and terracotta containers may break, because of the soil expanding when it freezes and pushing against the sides. If this is a concern, consider the unheated shed or garage method below.
- **An unheated shed or garage** will keep your trough out of the wind and help reduce problems from hungry rabbits or rodents. Because the plants will be dormant over the winter (even the evergreen types), it does not matter all that much if there is a source of light. Wait until very late fall to move them, about the time your garden soil freezes hard. Water them after moving so they are not too heavy. During winter, check them every once in awhile, and if the soil feels dry, just pile some snow on the trough or water the container instead. This should not need to be done more often than about once a month. Bring your trough back outside in early to mid spring and it will wake up naturally as the weather gets warmer.
- **A minimally heated garage** or cold room might be required to successfully winter your containers if you live in chilly Zones 1 through 3. Basically the method is the same as above, for an



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unheated shed, but aim to keep the temperatures in the range of -7 to 0 deg C (20 to 32 deg F). This method is also recommended if you are pushing the limits by growing plants not rated hardy to your Zone. We do not recommend trying to overwinter your Rock Stars® directly in the house or basement. Indoor temperatures are just too warm, and will lead to problems with rotting. Alpines come from cold regions and they really require a winter chill in order to grow properly.

- One last option is to **dismantle your trough** in mid fall, place the plants in your rock garden and start over fresh with new plants next spring. For gardeners in very cold winter regions this method may be the simplest.

Remaking Your Containers

After two to three seasons, you might find certain plants have become too large for the trough, others have stayed much the same and perhaps some have even vanished. At that point in time, consider dismantling the entire thing and either starting over with new Rock Stars® or saving certain ones you like and replacing others. Any plants you remove will be happy to find a new home in other parts of your garden.

You could also just redo a small section of the container planting, and a small trowel, kitchen spoon and a paring knife may be helpful when removing only a plant or two. This is also a good time to replenish the gravel mulch to make everything look fresh again.