



## Cool plants for rock gardens™

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### All About Rock Gardens

#### Wild and Wacky Ways

Here's where gardening with Rock Stars® can get really creative and fun! The only limit is your imagination.

#### Roof Gardens

We first saw examples of roof gardens during trips to Europe, where this seems to be a long tradition. Hen-and-chicks (*Sempervivum*) and various kinds of Stonecrop (*Sedum*) are often grown directly on top of terracotta or slate roof tiles where they cling by their tiny roots and take advantage of any little bits of soil or debris that gather at their base, supplying nutrients. Roof tiles are less common in most parts of North America, and we certainly don't advise attempting to grow plants on top of asphalt or cedar shingles or other roof surfaces where standing moisture could cause problems over time.

However, garden sheds and other small structures – a dog house or play house – are the perfect opportunity to do some experimenting with rooftop gardening. Consider first laying down a thick rubber or vinyl barrier (the type used for water gardens should work, or other types from roofing supply stores) before installing the final roof surface. Relatively shallow-pitched roofs are a better choice than steep ones, where the plants might wash away in the first heavy rain storm.



*A doghouse roof garden at the Chicago Botanic Garden*

Tiny little alpines will need some help adhering to the surface. We've seen a doghouse, for example, where the entire roof surface had a layer of soil a couple of inches thick, covered by sheet sphagnum moss then finally topped by a layer of chicken wire. It was a riot of colour from all kinds of succulents and other alpines. A roof garden planted as densely as this example requires regular watering.



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On higher roofs, like on a shed, it might be possible to take the individual rosettes of a Hen-and-chicks and actually glue them to the tiles using a hot glue gun. Another method is to make small soil pockets using pieces of dead sod (just ask your garden center if you can have a roll or two when they are discarding the old stuff). Flip the sod upside down, add a layer of sheet moss, then fix it down with a final layer of chicken wire and somehow attach this firmly to the tiles. Then you can poke in rosettes of Hen-and-chicks and little bits of Stonecrops, which will quickly root themselves into the soil below. Water these lightly every few days for a month or so, then just leave them alone and see what happens.



*Hen-and-Chicks on a tile roof in Austria*

### Green Roofs

Our example of very simple rooftop gardens above is quite different from the serious, large-scale approach to creating a green roof. Many commercial buildings are now integrating green roofs into their design in cities all over North America. It's a whole science involving a lot of high-tech materials, and not something that we could even begin to cover here. Building a green roof will require the help of professionals with experience. Try doing an internet search on key words such as *green roof construction* to locate information and experts such as Engineers who specialize in this area.



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### Crevice Gardens

This is a fairly new technique for growing alpines, first started in Czechoslovakia. The result is very simple in construction and absolutely stunning to look at. Imagine large pieces of flat flagstone rocks standing vertically out of the ground, one next to the other with a gap of a few inches in between. This gap is filled with soil, then covered in gravel mulch and the alpines are planted in these long and narrow crevice spaces. The standing rocks could be gently curving, jagged and angular in shape or even neatly trimmed into rectangles or very geometric shapes. On a tight budget, even pieces of broken patio stones could be used to good effect.



*Crevice garden at Montréal Botanic Garden*

For support, the lower portion of each stone is buried below the existing ground level before filling the gaps between the stones with the special alpine soil mixture. The result is a free standing rock structure that has a lot of great textural character and can easily be created for a large or a small space. You could even adapt this idea to containers and troughs, using flat pieces of thin slate, either natural or cut



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### Rubble Gardens

The idea here is to make use of things like bricks, broken concrete, clay, stone or other hard materials salvaged from building demolition, and give these a second life as a home to alpine plants. It's a fairly rustic look that results, and perhaps not to everyone's taste. Work in layers, just like you would with rocks, so that as you build upwards the spaces between the rubble is filled with an alpine soil mixture. Save your best reclaimed bits and pieces for the surface layers so that you can really take advantage of their unique features. Water this rubble pile well, and wait a few days so the soil has a chance to settle into the crevices before topping it up if needed, then adding your plants. As a final touch, consider covering the soil surfaces with a gravel mulch, to sort of tie the whole thing together as well as to reduce maintenance.



*An amazing rubble garden at an Austrian Nursery*

### Gardening with Children

Consider some fun shapes when laying out your gravel garden, for instance. Why not shape it into a long winding snake, a bunny rabbit or a dinosaur? Let your kids think up and create special features such as eyes, a nose and a mouth. Have them help you build, select Rock Stars® and plant it, and they will feel like this special garden is their very own. Parents who garden together with their children usually raise a person who has a life-long passion for gardening. And kids have a special way of putting the fun back in what we adults sometimes think of as a chore.





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### Found objects

We've touched on this idea already in our **Rock Stars® in Containers** section, but pretty much any object that will hold a bit of soil and can provide drainage (perhaps with the help of a drill) can be pressed into service for growing alpines. Keep this in mind the next time you're scouring a garage sale or flea market. Old pieces and doodads from farm or industrial equipment, from vehicles and from buildings might make a truly unique character container for a focal spot on your deck or patio. And consider all kinds of materials, from metal to wood, clay, stone or even plastic. Maybe this is the perfect thing to do with your brother's old drum kit, a beat up guitar or a French horn that suffered an unfortunate accident.



*Do something creative with that stack of old flower pots*

### Boots and Hats

Gardeners sometimes do charming things with boots, shoes or hats that have outlived their wearable purpose. They could sit as a collection at the edge of a step, or you could even nail them to a fence or wall before filling with soil and planting. The longevity of such a container will depend on the condition and what it's made of, but it could at least be fun for a season or two. Heading to a garden party? Why not make yourself a living hat and be the fashion hit.

### Living Sculptures

Here's a chance for the artist inside of you to build really interesting structures from all kinds of materials. A few nifty things we have seen:

- Three sheets of welded woven wire were fastened together into a free-standing triangle, lined on the inside with sheet sphagnum moss, coir fibre or burlap, then filled with soil. Alpines were then planted in the small square gaps between the wires. Literally, this was like a living column.



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- Clay pots are stacked one inside the other, then wired together through the holes. These can then be shaped into a three dimensional sculpture, anything from a freeform design to a terracotta person. Make it big or make it small. Planting opportunities are through the sides of broken pots, or in the gaps between pots when you change from a large pot to a smaller one. Just stuff these with soil, a few plants and some sheet moss. And of course, you could incorporate other materials to make facial features, for instance.
- Heavy steel I-beams of varying lengths are set into concrete so they stand vertically, and about six inches apart. Rocks are then shoved down into the gaps between the beams. Between the rocks, create planting pockets from chicken wire, sheet moss and soil.



*Steel I-Beam sculpture at the IGA Garden Show in Germany*

### Decorating your Rock Stars®

We encourage gardeners to get whimsical. It's your garden, after all, and we're not going to send over the style police anytime soon. Decorating could be seasonal or more long term. A few ideas:

- Put out candles or torches along the pathway through your gravel garden to create an interesting night time atmosphere.
- Having a party? What a great chance to show off your new rock garden and create a few chuckles at the same time. How about a fake mouth, nose and a pair of old glasses to make a face on some cute little cushion-shaped plant. It's an excellent use for that Mr. Potato Head that nobody ever plays with. Surely you have a platinum blond wig kicking around that needs to sit on top of a special head-shaped rock.
- Miniature pumpkins or gourds can look charming and right for the



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season, around Thanksgiving or Halloween. And, of course, bright and colourful plastic Easter eggs – hundreds of them. A rock garden provides plenty of hiding places to stage an Easter egg hunt.

- Water features can make a spectacular accent in a rock garden setting, giving opportunities to build your own miniature Niagara Falls. It's easiest to do this during initial construction.
- The ultimate accent to a rock garden could be a garden railway. Be warned though, it's an expensive and addictive endeavour, but it's also a way to get non-gardening members of the family interested and involved. Did you know there are clubs all across the continent for garden railway enthusiasts? For more information check out **Garden Railways Magazine**.



*Hen-and-Chicks collection in a ceramic wall sculpture*