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Rock Gardening in El Dorado County
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If you have ever been hiking in the Sierra Nevada, or driven along some high mountain road, you probably have been struck by the amazing hardiness of seemingly delicate flowers growing amidst the boulders, on steep hillsides, and even on cliff-faces. You can emulate this look in a rock garden.

A traditional European rock garden would be hard to cultivate in this part of the county, because traditional rock gardens emphasized plants that grew among the rocks in much cooler and wetter alpine country. Our Mediterranean climate, with its long, hot, dry summer would kill almost any alpine plant shortly after it was planted. But if you like the look, you can recreate it, using those plants available to you from a palate of native or Mediterranean plants.

If you are fortunate and already have rocks and a rugged landscape, you can plant among your native rocks. If your property is flat and rock free, you can import soil and rocks and make your own mini-Alpine landscape. Build up beds into mounds and plant rocks in them, leaving only about one-third of the rock above the soil. Try to use the same type of rocks, such as all granite, or all limestone. Use rocks to terrace the garden, or build rock walls to plant into. You can even emulate scree, which are smaller rocks that tumble loosely down a hillside.

Before purchasing plants, read the plant labels and always put the right plant in the right place. If your garden is in full sun, buy plants that can take full sun. Unless your plants are in shade and denser, water-retaining clay, buy low-water use plants. Keep proportion in mind as well -- the plants should not dominate the rocks, or one another.

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Alpine plants evolved to survive heavy snow, strong winds and prolonged exposure to UV rays. There are low, spreading plants, mounding plants, rounded shrubs and trees that stay small and become contorted (a form known as krummholz). Succulents and small, tough ferns grow in crevices and cracks. Grasses and rushes are low growing. There are Mediterranean and native plants that mimic all of these forms that grow in the foothills.

When planting, use the moisture retentive quality of rocks and plant along the tops, bottoms, or in the crevices. Some plants can spill over the tops of rocks, or billow up from the bases, while others can be punctuation marks among them. Use decomposed granite as a mulch for a more natural, alpine look. Be sure and include an irrigation system and water regularly until plants are fully established.

The Sherwood Demonstration garden includes a rock garden, with an irrigation system buried under the decomposed granite mulch. The plants are a combination of native hybrids and Mediterranean, and all are doing well with little water in full sun. It is low-maintenance, but like all gardens it needs to be maintained, with regular weeding, and deadheading.

The Master Gardeners are having a free class on Rock Gardening on August 27th, at Folsom College – El Dorado Center, and a tour of the rock garden in the Sherwood Demonstration Garden will be included in the class. Until then, the public is invited to tour the garden on Wednesdays, Fridays or Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.; located behind Folsom Lake College – El Dorado Center at 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville. (Note: Sherwood Demo Garden is closed for entire day when temperatures are forecasted for 95º and above.)

There is no Master Gardener class this weekend. UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions at local Farmers Markets, and Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/mgenews/. You can also find us on Facebook.