



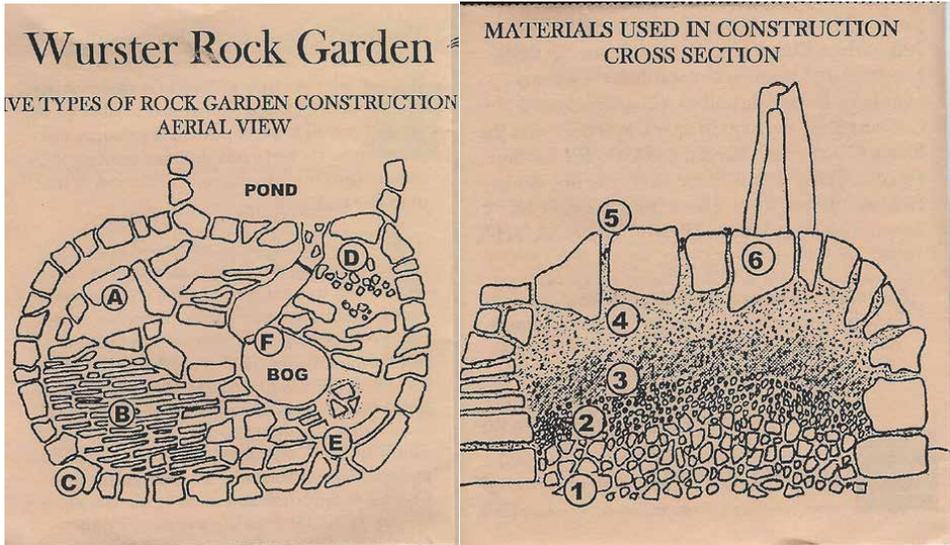
# Adirondack Chapter Builds a Public Rock Garden

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AS I LOOK upon our Adirondack Chapter's public rock garden, the Al Wurster Memorial Rock Garden built in 2000 and 2001, I'm still in awe of this monumental project that we undertook 20 years ago. The garden continues to be a showpiece today. Based on our experience, I believe your chapter could accomplish a similar project. And should you decide to tackle such a challenge, let me share some key components that were vital to its creation and on-going upkeep.

## **Planning**

This garden became a reality because of the vision and commitment of a handful of people. Planning a garden by committee requires many meetings, lots of discussion, and a willingness to revise and compromise as the process moves forward. Our ambitious plan for this garden didn't make the process any easier. Our goal was to make the garden educational, so our design included five different types of rock gardens: English, crevice, Czech crevice, sand bed, and wall.



Top: The designs for the garden showing the different types of gardens included, and the different materials used for the construction.  
Bottom: Designs on paper become reality as construction begins.



Top: a campanula finds rootholds in the crevices of the dry stone wall.  
Bottom: The meadow portion of the garden in spring bloom.



*Pulsatilla vulgaris*, a most welcome self-seeder.

The garden also has a bog and a series of graduated waterfalls that cascade into an existing water feature. In 2002, we added a sixth component, a hypertufa trough.

In the end, we are most indebted to two people. One was able to incorporate our ideas into a coherent garden design (as the story goes, sketched onto a cocktail napkin) and one who was a professional stonemason, whom we hired for the build. The latter was a financial splurge that proved to be well worth the cost. The rental of a backhoe also proved to be a great time, and back, saver.

### **Funding**

Building a rock garden takes a lot of sweat equity, but it also takes money. Starting with seed money from the Chapter, we applied for and were successful in receiving a \$1,500 grant from NARGS's Norman Singer Endowment Fund. In addition, we sought numerous in-kind



Chapter members hard at work building the rock garden.



All the hard work pays off with this, the finished garden in 2001.

donations from our local nurseries. The last piece that let us meet our fundraising goal came from an unanticipated source, the Al Wurster Memorial Fund.

Al was a gardeners' 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 Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners, the Liberty Hyde Bailey Garden Club, and our own Adirondack NARGS Chapter.

Al met an untimely death in 1997. So that his legacy would live on, his family established this Fund, augmented by gifts from many contributors, in his name for the greater good of the gardening community. Our proposal to build a rock garden became a beneficiary. Additionally, Cooperative Extension offered us a space on their property to build the garden. Thus, we finally had the last pieces in place and were ready to bring our plans to fruition.

### **Building**

With the initial excitement that often accompanies a new project, quite a few of our Chapter members stepped up to help with the construction. With more people-power than money, we had to get creative, doing our own picking and hauling of local limestone from a nearby quarry and seeking plant donations from our members. We were moving stones both large and small and ton upon ton of rubble, sand, gravel, and compost. Onlookers found it hard to believe all those piles of raw materials would be transformed into something of beauty. The following spring, with the construction largely finished, we were able to plant. It's amazing what can be accomplished by a small group of determined people.



Top: *Dianthus*, *Phyteuma cordatum* and *Helianthemum nummularium*.  
Bottom: *Iberis sempervirens* exhibited a bit too much exuberance and has since been restrained; others pictured include *Iris pumila*, phlox, and *Aurina saxatilis*.

### **On-going Commitment**

Our rock garden was built and continues to thrive today because of our Chapter's commitment. Rock gardens may require less maintenance than a perennial border, but they do need regular attention from our dedicated handful of volunteers. Finding enough volunteers is perhaps our greatest challenge. Many of our Chapter members live far away so it is not realistic to expect their help.

Some years we have struggled to find enough volunteers. In those years, the garden has gone a bit wild with rogues self-sowing at will. They do provide a floriferous show (and the public is none the wiser) but the smaller plants struggle to compete. In the long run, it has made for more work and expense as we cull the rogues that have become unwelcome weeds and replant more desirable plants.



*Salix nakamura* var. *yezoalpina* thriving in the bog area.



Newly planted trough built and added to the garden in 2012.

### **Ongoing Challenges**

If your chapter thinks it might be interested in taking on a project such as this, be aware there are some on-going challenges.

First, we lose many plants due, in large part, to the challenge of maintenance. Planting at less than optimal times of the growing season and lack of an irrigation system are two main challenges, not to mention the aforementioned issue of finding adequate volunteers. Of course, there are nature's challenges too, including plants that give up the ghost, the squirrels who eat our bulbs, and cottonwood seeds from neighboring properties that blow in and germinate. In other words, we are faced with the usual gardeners' dilemmas.

While we continue to get plant donations from members, the garden requires an annual influx of funds (generally ranging from \$100-300) and this has become part of our Chapter's annual budget.

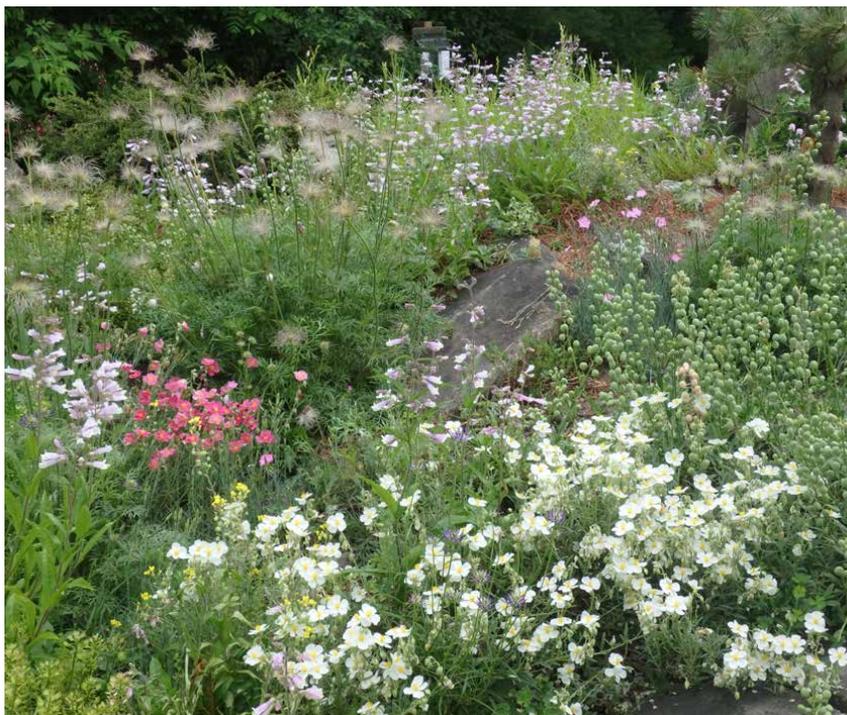
Public gardens also pose special challenges. Visitors love to climb on the rocks, often trampling our treasured plants. We have posted signs – unfortunately not very attractive – with limited success. With no on-site caretaker, we have no one to monitor the behavior of our visitors.

## Looking Ahead

However, we can say unequivocally that the rewards of this garden have far outweighed the challenges. The spectacular flush of springtime blooms serves as a testament to this and certainly generates interest. The garden demonstrates the beauty and potential of a rock garden and we have created something enduring. The garden is used as a basis for classes and tours, as an avenue to recruit new members, and as a vehicle for all of us to continue to learn about rock gardening and rock garden plants.

We are now looking ahead to the garden's 20th season and can reflect on the transformations this garden has undergone. At the time we undertook this project, it never occurred to us that it would be a learning experience for us every bit as much as it would be a teaching tool for the public.

*The Al Wurster Memorial Rock Garden is located at the offices of Tompkins County Cooperative Extension in the city of Ithaca. Attendees of the 2020 Conference may choose to visit this garden in their free time.*



The meadow garden in full bloom.