

## Rock Garden

by Francis Idoux, Bell County Master Gardener

What kind of a garden can withstand the summer heat of Texas and require little water or maintenance, yet can provide a bounty of color, variety, and fragrance?

Our son taught me the answer to this gardening question. His interest in desert plants motivated him to establish for me a rock garden that has flourished in spite of our area's rocky soil, scorching temperatures, and even the downpours of this June. These plants are tough! Not only are they resilient, but these survivors are lovely. The damianita plants have cheerfully produced bloom after lemon-yellow bloom, and the red yuccas have vigorously sent up flower-laden stalks. The Mexican feather grass has added its creamy strands to the colorful display of the penstemons. All of these plants offer much and make modest requests; their major requirements are sunshine and good drainage.

Rock gardens come in all shapes and sizes; each one should be a reflection of the creativity and individuality of the gardener. The specimen gardens at Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin and at the Antique Rose Emporium in Brenham demonstrate what a delightful assortment is available for the gardener. Numerous varieties of cactus, aloes, agaves, lantana, penstemons, salvias, and wildflowers -- the shopping list can become long!

Because of the diversity of the selections, taking time to create a plan for a rock garden is essential to success. Before you head out with your shopping list, it is important to determine where the plants will go when you bring them home. Consider what you want to plant and where you want to locate the garden. Take into account the color and texture of the plants and their eventual size when full grown. Make a sketch of a design that will include the plants you want to select. When you have a sketch, the next step is to identify a site of the proper size in your yard that will receive a generous amount of sunshine.

Then you must be sure that the planting site has good drainage. If your yard has caliche, the typical clay-like soil of this area, building a raised bed may be the solution. Adding a layer of well-draining garden soil will give your plants an opportunity to establish roots. Creating an elevated mound for planting also promotes good drainage. Another challenge that your soil can present may require a pick ax. Our son soon discovered that the term 'rock garden' was accurate for the area he had chosen; he needed a pick ax to prepare the soil for planting.

Once your site is ready, the project becomes easier. Select the plants that will become part of your garden and decide what material you will use to cover the ground around them; either pea gravel or small white rocks work well. Using the plan you designed, install the plants you have chosen and water them well. You will need to water the plants carefully until they are established. The nursery where you purchase your plants should be a good source of information about the specific needs of each plant. Once established, your garden will be low maintenance. If you added an adequate covering of gravel or rocks, you will not have to add more each season, and few weeds will try to invade.

The last step will simply be to enjoy your garden. After the initial effort, our son's garden has required little effort, and the plants have provided a succession of blooms since early spring. In fact, the first garden has been so successful that our son added two more this spring. With help from a lovely gardening partner, he designed and installed the pair on the other side of our yard. They are living gifts from a son, now busy with medical residency, and his gardening partner, now his bride. They are a bouquet -- fragrant sages, Texas betony, black-eyed susans -- that will appear every day.