Nowadays, many of the bigger garden centres and nurseries offer a wide range of containers in which alpines can be grown: replica troughs and sinks in many shapes, sizes and finishes. Some are made from reconstituted stone, and others from a lightweight polymer with an authentic-looking stone-like finish. There are also containers like strawberry pots, terracotta planters and containers in a wide range of other finishes. A huge range of alpine plants is available that will thrive and prosper in any of these containers; indeed, many will find a contentment in these that would be difficult to equal elsewhere in the garden.

Why grow alpines in containers?

- You don’t need a garden to grow alpines. There should be room to accommodate at least one container in the smallest courtyard or patio.
- You can keep an eye on small and choice plants that would otherwise get lost in a rock garden.
- Slugs and other pests can more easily be kept at bay.
- They can be covered (if desired) in winter giving a drier environment to the plants.
- Plants will be closer to eye level, giving a more convenient height for viewing and maintenance.
- Containers, with the plants in situ, can be taken with you if you move house.
What is the best place for troughs?

The majority of alpine plants do best in an open sunny position. The ideal place would be a south-facing paved or gravelled area. If you cannot provide this, do not worry, because some alpines will be content in shady positions.

Troughs in particular, look better if they are raised up on bricks or concrete blocks, and this gives easier access to the plants. If you have difficulty with levelling, wobbles can be dealt with by sliding one or two plastic plant labels underneath.

Drainage and compost for troughs.

Your trough will need at least one drainage hole, with a few pieces of broken clay flowerpot or a piece of perforated zinc placed over each hole. If it is large and deep you will need to cover the bottom with about 3 cm of course drainage material: gravel, stone chips, broken pots or something similar. If it is shallow, you can dispense with the drainage material, provided that the compost is open and well-drained.

For compost recommendations, see Info Leaflet 06: Easy Composts for Alpines.

Rocks.

A few well-placed rocks not only give a pleasing finish to a trough, but also have a practical purpose: many alpine plants will benefit from having their roots under the cool undersides. Nowadays there is a huge choice of rocks and gravel at many garden centres. When the rocks have been positioned and the planting completed, cover the surface of the compost with matching stone chippings. These give a pleasing finish and reduce evaporation from the surface on hot days. A covering of about 2 cm deep is sufficient. Carefully tuck the chippings under each plant so that none of the foliage is in contact with the soil.
Choice alpine plants for troughs.

*Gentiana verna.*

The most beautiful of all trough dwellers is the Spring Gentian. It has the most vivid blue flowers of any plant, and nowadays can be bought from many outlets. It is a lime-lover and does best in gritty, humus-rich compost.

*Delosperma nubigenum.*

From South Africa, and one of the hardiest and best species. The vivid yellow daisy-like flowers are plentiful, first appear at the end of April and go well into the end of June. It needs a well-drained location in full sun. It will eventually form a large clump, but can easily be divided and split for use in other locations and will never become a nuisance.

*Saxifraga.*

This wonderful genus offers a vast choice of treasures suitable for trough culture. Reliable performers include: *Saxifraga x apiculata, S. x edithae ‘Bridget’, S. x burnatii ‘Esther’, S. oppositifolia ‘Ruth Draper’* Do also include some of the many cultivars of *S. x megasæflora* in your choice.

*Campanulas.*

These should be chosen with caution, as some are too rampant to be let lose in a trough. (Avoid *Cc. portenschlagiana* and *garganica.*) *C. betulifolia* is lovely in a corner where its large creamy white bells can tumble over the side. *C. Elizabeth Oliver* is a gem: pale green foliage with dainty double sky-blue bells on slender stems.

*Sempervivum (Houseleeks).*

These are tough, easily-grown plants that will look good for very many years, if those with the smallest rosettes are chosen. Try *S. arachnoideum, S. nevadense, S. montanum* and one of the many varieties of *S. calcareaum*. There are many thousands of cultivars in a vast range of fascinating colours and forms.
**Centaurium scilloides.**

A most charming little plant that would be lost in the garden! It has small, rounded, shiny green leaves and bright rose-pink flowers. It will happily seed about and come up in unexpected places, but is not in the least invasive.

**Morisia monanthos** from Corsica and Sardinia, inhabits coastal sands. The attractive dark, glossy green, fern-like leaves are the perfect foil for the bright golden crucifer flowers that appear from March to July.

**Dianthus.**

Choose only the smaller ones. *D. haematocalyx*, *D. freynii*, *D. alpinus* and *D. microlepis* are excellent. All are lovers of sun and lime and a well-drained soil and are usually at their peak in June, when the first flush of spring-flowering alpines are coming to an end. Their foliage is decorative throughout the year.

**Globularia bellidifolia.**

This can be a wonderful, long-lived plant with densely tufted, tiny, wedge-shaped leaves and small pom-pom flowers in varying shades of grey-blue.

**Bulbs.**

The majority of bulbs should not be planted in troughs with other alpines, with perhaps the exception of really diminutive ones like *Narcissus rupicola*, *N. juncifolius* (*N. assoanus*), and some of the smaller *N. bulbocodium* varieties and forms. *Oxalis* ‘Ione Hecker’ and *O. laciniata* and its varieties are fine, as are *Rhodohypoxis*.

**Dwarf conifers and shrubs.**

Many conifers offered in Garden Centres as “dwarf and slow growing” will become much too big for a trough in as little as three years. If you do want the smallest, slowest-growing conifers, it is better to seek them out from a specialist nursery. The few other shrubs that would be suitable include; *Salix boydii*, the smaller hebes such as *H. tetrasticha*, *H. ‘Tiny Tot’* and *H. buchananii ‘Minor’*. *Cotoneaster congestus ‘Nanus’* will hug the sides of a trough with its tiny spoon-shaped evergreen leaves on gnarled stems. With occasional pruning it will be an attractive feature for many years.