

Miniature Gardens

Mini gardens are a superb means to show aesthetic as well as horticultural skills, allowing experts and beginners alike to express their joy of alpinism in a form which gives year-round pleasure.



The variety of possible forms for mini gardens is as great as the number of individuals who create them.

There are gardens which reflect the mountains, whether high peaks, screes or moraines.

There are also woodland gardens and some with ferns.

Gardens with spring flowers and others with autumn foliage.

Specialist gardens with cushion plants or with bulbs.



Established gardens may have as many as thirty to forty plants in a vast range of types and from many different parts of the world.

The object is to make a display which pleases the creator first and perhaps then the judges at one of the many AGS shows.

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THE POT

Finding a pot which is the ideal shape and size for miniature gardens at AGS shows can be a problem.

The ideal specification is lightweight and large enough to be pleasing, but without exceeding the maximum outside diameter (36cm,) not too deep, and frost proof. This is not a combination which is easily found in clay pots and plastic has become the preferred option for many. For beginners a pot which is 25 – 30cm wide and 10 – 15cm deep is ideal.



DRAINAGE

It is essential to provide ample drainage in the pot since the garden should remain undisturbed for some time as plants establish. If it is intended to build the garden quite high (see under landscape), anything up to half the pot may be filled with drainage material. Lightweight aggregates – even polystyrene chips – will help to minimise the final weight of the garden.

THE COMPOST

A mixture of two parts John Innes Compost No. 2 or 3 with one part grit will provide a good solid base for most plants.



Where it is intended to grow more woodland plants this can be modified with more organic material such as peat or composted bark. See AGS Easy Leaflet 'Easy Compost for Alpines' for a broad range of mixtures which would also be suitable for miniature gardens.

Before starting the landscape, 'overfill' the pot with enough compost so that some will need to be removed as the landscaping proceeds. Taking out is much easier than adding more.

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THE LANDSCAPE

Developing an attractive and practical landscape is probably the most difficult part of making a good 'show' miniature garden. Tufa works well and, with the possibility to plant directly into or through the rock, is probably the most forgiving, but slate, schist, sandstone, coal, wood and probably many more have all featured at some time or another.



The objective is to create as many planting opportunities as possible, with mountain peaks, crevices, screes or moraines, meadows, shady overhangs etc., etc. Taking time at this stage will bear rich rewards later as it can be very difficult to change the character of a garden once it is established. Perhaps the most important objective is to create height.

A relatively shallow pot can be made to almost disappear as the garden becomes established.



Always seek to build a landscape which is at least as high again as the pot is deep, which also helps in creating the various options when planting up.

While the idea of one large lump of tufa may seem attractive, breaking it up into smaller pieces to be reassembled as the build proceeds will invariably be more flexible.

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PLANTING UP

There are a few general rules that may be found of help when planting mini-gardens for show.

- Never give a plant too much room. Pack them in. This way they stay compact and in keeping.
- Never feed. They don't need it.
- Do not over water – just when needed.
- Never plant conifers and such above the 'tree line'. A little mountain top goes a long way in the landscape.
- When plants get too big take them out. Plants that are out of proportion score poorly.
- When removing plants take them out as a plug using an old kitchen knife leaving the perfect hole to pack in new plants. Don't be tempted to try teasing out the roots as it damages the surrounding plants too much.
- When planting, take the new plant out of the pot, (or garden or trough), shake off ALL the soil, and squeeze the roots tightly into a slim 'carrot' which allows plants to be introduced into very small spaces between rocks or other plants without too much disturbance. Always make sure the plants are very thoroughly firmed into the hole.
- When taking plants from pots remember to take a cutting or two. You have the pot, compost and label already!
- When planting in tufa or other rocks, drill through into the compost beneath and, where possible, pull them tight from the other side before replacing the rock.
- Don't coddle the garden. Let it see the weather, even in winter.

PLANTS – Any small plants such as Sedum, Saxifrage, Sempervivum, Primula, Androsace, Draba, Erinus, Scilla etc. etc., will enjoy mini garden conditions, and don't be afraid to use common plants which self-seed in the garden.

Try small dwarf conifers and other trees to enhance the landscape effect.

