

The BIG Society for small plants

# Alpines in Troughs

Troughs are a simple but very effective way to grow alpine plants in conditions as close to their natural environment as possible, allowing plants to be grown to perfection.



The variety of sizes and shapes of troughs is as great as the number of individuals who create them, whether constructed from wood, stone, concrete or plastic foam; and remember, the plants don't care if a trough was made last week or last century.

There are troughs which reflect mountain landscapes with high peaks, screes or moraines, and there are woodland gardens and some with ferns or with spring flowers, and specialist gardens with succulents, cushion plants or bulbs. Crevice gardens too have gained great popularity recently.



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## THE TROUGH

Finding a trough of ideal dimensions may prove difficult, which is why the construction of troughs to your own design may be desirable.

The ideal specification is lightweight and large enough to be pleasing, and to allow the chosen range of plants to thrive. However traditional stone troughs may prove to be a great temptation – if you can find one - and move it! There are many concrete troughs available to buy.

Alternatively, acquire a fish or vegetable box of a suitable size, gently heat the surface with a blow torch to slightly melt the plastic foam which will roughen and harden it. Then paint with a stone or other paint.



## DRAINAGE

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

## 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 trough with enough compost so that some will need to be removed as the landscaping proceeds.

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## THE LANDSCAPE

Developing an attractive and practical landscape is probably the most difficult part of making an attractive trough. There are many options to build a landscape including tufa slate, schist, sandstone, coal, wood and probably many more, all of which have featured at some time or another.



The objective is to create as many planting opportunities as possible, with mountain peaks, crevices, screens 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 trough once it is established. Perhaps the most important objective is to create height.



Always seek to build a landscape which is at least as high again as the trough is deep, which helps to create 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.

Setting stones on edge will also allow a design to gain height in the form of 'mountain 'ranges' or crevice gardens.

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## PLANTING UP – general rules

- First, before planting up, make sure the trough is where you expect it to end up, since moving planted troughs is often impossible. Choose a location depending on what you wish to grow. Sites may offer everything from deep shade for ferns and woodlanders to full sun for drought tolerant species.
- Never give a plant too much room. Pack them in. That way they stay compact and in keeping - unless of course the intention is to grow individual specimen plants.
- Feed only occasionally. They don't need it. Don't 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 will spoil the overall effect.
- Use stones or pieces of wood to create shady areas and to allow the roots to find cool spots. The more of the surface is covered, the less watering will be needed.
- When planting, take the new plant and shake off the soil. Squeezing the roots tightly into a slim 'carrot' 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 compost.
- It is worth remembering that troughs are ideal places to root cuttings and don't spoil the visual effect with labels unless they are hidden. Let the plants remember their own names!
- Read the Easy Leaflet on composts to select the most suitable for your intended plants.

PLANTS – Any small plants such as Sedum, Saxifrage, Sempervivum, Primula, Androsace, Draba, Erinus, Scilla etc. etc., will enjoy trough conditions, and don't be afraid to use common plants which self-seed in the garden. Try small dwarf conifers perhaps to enhance the landscape effect (even Bonsai!).



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