Uplands: Life Among the Alpines

Catherine Hull

Rock gardening is a spell—if you succumb to it there is seldom any turning aside from the passionate love of small wild things. There is no point pontificating or preaching—it swoops you up or it leaves you cold.

Do you choose gardening or does it choose you? I thought I had chosen to make a perennial garden, first in a suburb of Washington, D.C., and later in a small town north of Boston. Then one day I saw from a friend’s window a wild mountain poppy growing in a crevice of rock, the orange flower moving gracefully with every breath of air, no bigger than a small butterfly. Instantly I dropped the idea of a lush herbaceous border and began a love affair with wild things, especially those that grow high in the mountains, called alpines. Soon I joined the North American Rock Garden Society. At my very first meeting, which was held at the foot of Mt. Washington, the principal speaker was Lincoln Foster, the guru of all rock gardeners. Then and there my gardening life changed forever. A very strenuous future stretched before me.

Happily, my conversion followed closely the purchase of our new home. The property is on a hill a hundred feet above sea level looking out to Massachusetts Bay. The landscape architect Fletcher Steele had designed a small upland garden here in the 1930s. He made a wisteria arbor with stone columns, a border of hybrid tea rose and clematis along a narrow lawn, a goldfish pool with a full-size statue of Neptune presiding at one end, and a long border of rhododendron and laurel.

My only previous gardening experience had been in backyards, where I had struggled with double digging to incorporate better soil and compost. But here, one thrust of a shovel and CLANG!—a rock! It was soon obvious that the hill was literally solid granite with only a thin skin of soil. No hole deeper than four inches could be dug except in the middle of the lawn. (We later learned that Steele had had to import truckloads of loam to create that lawn.) But at last there was a reason for rock—a wonderful reason—rock plants.

My first efforts began on an island in the driveway where a granite ledge underlies a rather thick growth of trees—pines, hemlocks, oaks, and some Japanese maples planted in Steele’s time. By clearing a section of ledge and filling depressions and pockets with the basic rock garden mix of leaf mold, topsoil, and sharp sand, I made a setting for a small rock garden. It was intensely satisfying to have my first love, alpine poppies, grow from seed and do well in the company of some other easy-to-please low plants such as Dianthus and Iberis.

This early success led me next to the long-overgrown border of rhododendron and laurel near the lawn. Lincoln Foster had said that if he had to create a space to grow rock plants, nothing could compare to the planted wall. It seemed wise to follow his advice, all the more because a rock wall was available: it supported the rhododendron bed that lay along a walk Steele had planted with flowering dogwood. The trees could provide the high dappled shade needed for the wall’s southern exposure. I felt no compunction about removing the old laurel and rhododendron; they had been aging unhappily for reasons that became evident when they were dug. The soil they lived in was desiccated and pale, with no possibility of moisture retention, hardly deserving the name of earth.
Neptune, rescued from a water tower in Needham by Fletcher Steele, stands over the reflecting pool at Uplands. Two colonies of Steele’s signature plant, the large-leaved butterbur, Petasites hybridus, can be seen to the right of the pool; the Atlantic Ocean is beyond.

The stones in the existing wall were round and unattractive; it was a bonanza to find a tumbling wall of well-weathered granite fieldstones at the foot of the hill. I must have been the despair of the skilled masons doing the job, insisting as I did that the lichenized side of any rock be turned outward and that they pack between the stones the special mix I had prepared. They were able to fill the whole depth of the old laurel-rhododendron bed with newly mixed soil suitable, we hoped, for a stony scree for mountain plants. In nature, scree is the loose rock debris found at the base of large rock masses or left behind on slopes by the movement of glaciers. To create it artificially in a raised bed one needs deep underpinnings of small stones or rubble. We put in well over a foot, then sandwiched in some leaves or hay to prevent the finer soil mix on top from sifting down.

I had been gathering small plants from specialist nurseries and from friends’ coldframes, and I had also grown some from seed. Many of the smallest were inserted between the stones on the face of the wall; others were placed on top in the prepared scree bed. The plants were mulched with at least two inches of gravel or stone chips to keep the roots cool and protect the leaves from soil spattering.

Soon after the granite wall and raised bed were completed, plants were flourishing. The backbone was provided by small conifers and shrubs, such as Daphne, both cneorum ‘Eximia’ and alpina, Leiophyllum buxifolium var. prostratum, and the nearly prostrate Vaccinium macrocarpon ‘Hamilton’. The loveliest of all was Kalmiopsis leachiana ‘Umpqua Valley’ propagated by Alfred Fordham at the Arnold Arboretum. Lewisia were soon thriving, as were small saxifrages and an Asperula nitida ssp. hirtella (or A. n. puberula, as it is often known) recently collected by an explorer in Turkey; Androsace sowed themselves—in short, it was
gorgeous. So much so that I wanted more wild plants, not only from mountain peaks but from bogs and woodlands as well.

With a book in one hand and shovel in the other, I tried to dig a bog, succeeding in getting down only about four or five inches before striking granite. I dutifully followed the book’s instructions to line the designated bog space with several layers of plastic and to fill it with dampened peat laced with a small amount of sand, although as the years go on I realize that the layer of ledge alone would undoubtedly have kept the moisture in. Not everything in that spot is a bog plant, but Helonias bullata, Saxifraga pensylvanica, Primula denticulata, and Cardamine pentaphyllos do well.

Along paths Fletcher Steele must have planned many years ago, we added woodland plants, among them both the single and double Trillium and Sanguinaria, Clintonia, Primula, Erythronium, Arisaema, and ferns. In a fairly
Trillium recurvatum

open area near an old hemlock we planted *Glaucidium palmatum*, which has become one of the showiest early spring bloomers and an enormous favorite. Below a low rocky cliff by the lawn we planted one of my best-loved ferns, a maidenhair, *Adiantum venustum*, and above on the level shelf of rock a single *Dodecatheon maedia* 'Album', which has selfsown and created a community. *Gentiana scabra*, the Japanese fall gentian, behaved the same way, colonizing the cliff. A few *Claytonia virginica* planted early on have made a wonderful white spring carpet for the shooting stars—a serendipitous result.

Euonymus and ivy groundcovers, thoroughly entrenched, had been planted by Steele as “maintenance free” for his client in the 1930s. When we pulled them away, some good natives appeared as if released from jail. The most exciting was *Erythronium americanum*, which continues to spread, with considerable bloom in early spring. A few patches of *Anemone quinquefolia* came to life and have been hopping about ever since.

Little by little, the garden was being extended. We made a dwarf rhododendron collection on raised islands—homes for cuttings from Polly Hill’s North Tisbury hybrid azaleas and for a few crosses made by Lincoln Foster at his garden, Millstream, in Falls Village, Connecticut. Other ericaceous plants came back with us from trips to England and Scotland, along with many plants for the rock garden’s scree.

Not all the effort was expended on the upland garden. We had been in the house only a few weeks in the fall of 1967 when one night we heard the sound of rushing water outside. Early the next day we thrashed our way downhill through the dense growth of brush and trees and found a stream struggling through thickets of alders. Had the gods read my wish list? A stream had always been near the top, but neither the real estate agent nor the former owner had ever mentioned one. Our discovery triggered vast effort to clear the alders, deepen the channel, accentuate the rocky waterfalls, and create a few pockets to hold water even in summer.

The desire to see the stream from the house helped us confront the forty years’ growth of briars, poison ivy, nettles, wild grape, and unwanted trees on the hillside—the growth that comes after land has once been cleared and is reverting to its natural woodland state. Oak, beech, and ash had been strangled and stunted by the competition. In these days of raised ecological consciousness, it is considered wicked to call any natural state a horticultural nightmare,
but we had to come to terms with this tangled wilderness in order to let in more air and light, to widen the view of the ocean at the upper level, and to make paths down the hill and up again.

For several years, my husband and a succession of college students pulled and cut. I followed with salt-marsh hay and piles of newspapers (we haven’t thrown one out for twenty-eight years). There may be better ways to discourage unwanted vegetation, but I can only report on what we did here. The biodegradable paper and hay are adding a richer, deeper soil quite rapidly. Of course, much that is unwanted gladly seeds in, but so do more welcome volunteers.

I still needed more space for my growing collection of alpines. Where could I make another bed with sufficient light, away from the shade and the drip of trees, preferably with a northern exposure? The answer was the ailing rose and clematis border. My attempts to make those plants happy had been a complete failure. The roses were leggy and had blackspot. The clematis were supposed to climb only sixteen inches to the top of the dressed-slate retaining wall, then lie down flat and show glad faces to an admiring audience sipping tea on the terrace above. But it didn’t work that way for me. In spite of my teasing and training the vines along a horizontal trellis on top of the wall, there was more wilt than bloom. Once again, plants were dug out for anyone wishing to take them.

I had been hearing more and more about tufa—that calcareous rock, very porous, pocked with holes and narrow tubes. It was our great good fortune to learn of an estate where a cache of tufa—treasure to rock gardeners—was unwanted by the owners. They let several of us take away all we could carry. With that unexpected windfall we soon had an Aladdin’s supply in all shapes and sizes.

Fortunately the rose and clematis bed was at the edge of the long lawn Fletcher Steele had made with imported soil, so it was possible to dig. At about two feet down we poured in bags of vermiculite, as I had read of its ability to hold moisture under a large raised bed. Next we added lavish loads of gravel and sand; then assorted-sized pieces of tufa were embedded in a long series of mounds of prepared soil. Soon after this pudding was completed and some plants put in, the elements took a hand. The result was a sunken soufflé: I had made the mix too humus-y, with too much peat and leaf mold. So I began again and belatedly listened to advice from others. We buried cinder blocks along the edge near the lawn to support the largest, base pieces of tufa and instead of a soil mixture used only coarse sand to position the other pieces, with occasional chunks of granite wedged underneath to hold them in place. A four-inch layer of the regular rock garden soil mix was topped with two inches of stone mulch to give the plants a start. They responded with the usual euphoria of young plants in fresh soil in settings to their liking.

Soon alpine poppies blazed over the long bed, Saxifraga settled in, Androsace, Hutchinsia alpina, Aethionema oppositifolium, some Penstemon, Dianthus, and Erinus—a pleasant mosaic of small plants colorful in May and early June. Many of the small ferns took gladly to the tufa, and I have had much better luck with Adiantum pedatum var. subpumilum (often known as A. p. var. aleuticum) and Asplenium trichomanes in that porous rock than in the granite. Cystopteris bulbifera f. crispa has taken a very determined and welcome hold. The happiest combination may have been a small pink Erigeron compositus endemic to the Wallawa Mountains in Oregon and Gentiana acaulis grown from seed. The past tense applies to that companionship as the large gentian gave up after a season of twenty-four blossoms; young gentians have been planted to see if they can recreate the good years. There are small shrubs: Salix arbuscula and S. hylematica, Tsusiophyllum tanakae, Daphne arbuscula indigenous to the Tatra Mountains, Ulmus parviflora, Ptilotrichum spinosum ‘Purpureum’, and others to provide a different interest and change of texture. Certainly some plants self-sow too vigorously and others fade quietly away, but on the whole the tufa bed still gives us great pleasure.

You seldom see a rock garden without dwarf conifers. The high mountains have only occasional windbent stems or twisted trunks above
Drifts of the white Hutchinsia alpinum, the ever-faithful of the tufa bed, remain constant while other plants come and go. In the upland garden, spring’s color gives way in summer to various greens and the interest of differing textures while meadow plants flower on the lower hill. Notwithstanding the blaze of the New England woods, fall in the garden is a quieter season, when the plants begin to collect themselves and prepare to return to their beginnings.

the treeline, but in a garden landscape more persistent punctuation is needed, some backbone for small plants. A little difference in eye level is welcome as one looks at the scree, raised bed, or wall, and a conifer’s dark green shape helps accentuate the plants around it. Juniperus, Abies, Picea, Tsuga, Chamaecyparis, all are useful and present in various sizes in our tufa and granite beds. Many of these so-called dwarf conifers proved eager to become giants and had to be moved down the hill, where they are now anchors of dark green or steel blue in all seasons.

My education as a rock gardener has proceeded slowly over the years. It is curious to see what remains constant in one’s affections and what begins to pall. And startling how hard some lessons are to learn. It is painful to realize that not all the plants you love will stay with you long. Enormous help came to me from courses at the Arnold Arboretum, and I wish I could have taken others at the New England Wild Flower Society. One acquires books along the way—I started out reading them like detective stories—and there are answers from the experts who lecture at seminars, clubs, and plant societies. For a rock gardener the North American Rock Garden Society is a constant source of help, of plant sales and swaps, and of seeds. The contagious zeal of all plantspeople is a never-ending propellant.

One of the ABC lessons I have been shamefully slow in absorbing is the continually changing nature of a garden. Some plants have a tendency to move out from the place where they have performed beautifully and seek new ground. I am thinking, for instance, of Primula kisoana, the special color form that Dr. Rokujo
in Japan sent to Lincoln Foster. It made a striking splash over a yard wide by a woodland path for several years, then began to meander all over, leaving a blank space behind. Many plants that don’t wander away or die simply become weak images of their former selves.

The scree bed in the granite wall has been in need of rejuvenation for several years, and piecemeal efforts have not produced much improvement. I am seeking solutions to avoid the upheaval a total rebuilding would require. I have allowed some biennials too much license: *Symphyandra hofmannii* has been a lusty invader, *Scabiosa lucida* another. For a while *Phyteuma orbiculare* was a threat. Honesty and rocket are all over the place. After battling briars and poison ivy, such comely takeovers seemed almost welcome, but the day of reckon-
ing comes relentlessly: digging and renewing the soil and replanting are urgently needed.

When I tire of working with tiny seedlings in a small corner of the granite scree or tufa bed, I plunge downhill. There I can thrash around, cutting back dock, overzealous daisies, and exuberant goldenrod; plant some of the taller Penstemon, Perovskia, Anemone, different forms of Digitalis, varieties of Cimicifuga and Rodgersia, and other plants I like. I am not sure yet whether I regret introducing some of the ornamental grasses. Many of them can become monstrously large and difficult to move.

Scattered over the hillside are shrubs such as Fothergilla, both major and gardenii, Viburnum, Daphne, Syringa meyeri 'Palibin', Heptacodium miconioides, Vaccinium, Lespedeza thunbergii, and others. We are planting only small trees and individual specimens, among them Acer triflorum, A. griseum, Cornus kousa, various forms of Stewartia, and a Chionanthus retusus collected by members of the Arnold Arboretum staff on the Sino-American Expedition in 1980.

In spite of the clearing and cutting of our early years here, only about one-third of the hill is in full sunshine. The most shaded areas are being encouraged to grow different species of ferns as well as lots of Cimicifuga, Epimedium, Vancouveria hexandra, Alchemilla mollis, Aruncus, and much else. Some of the ferns—the ostrich (Matteucia struthiopteris) is one—are adopting a belligerent tone and marching fiercely up the hill. Asarum europaeum and Waldsteinia ternata are taking hold along the edges of paths, and many other plants have been moved down from the woodland garden where they had multiplied beyond their space.

Schools of thought on gardening are continually changing, just as gardens themselves do. One of the most observant writers, Mac Griswold, has said that gardeners want to know if it's possible to restore the environment and have a garden, too. There is even an outcry in some places against doing battle with slugs, chipmunks, and woodchucks. It takes a tremendous mental wrench to perceive their presence as anything but invasive; in fact, it is more than I can do in parts of the garden. Is a favorite plant

*The author down the hill in her "wilderness."*
Symphyandra wanneri with Anemonella thalictroides.

Korean stone lantern obscured by Trillium grandiflorum and Arisaema sikokianum.

to be lost because it is caviar to a chipmunk or just what the slug was waiting for? Is it to be struck from our list because it is not native? I am sorry that the ecological crisis has thrust guilt on some gardeners. Can it be lifted where plants are concerned and channeled instead onto overspraying with pesticides and herbicides and the overuse of chemical fertilizers?

One ecological theme can hardly be contested—the one praising compost. For lack of loam and soil on our property we have turned compost-making into a homescale industry with cinder block bins in an out-of-the-way spot and a shredder to speed up the process when there is time to use it. Every fall and spring the shredder is in heavy use chopping up the autumn crop of leaves and coping with those left behind in spring as well. These leaves are used for surfacing the paths, for mulch, for compost. The bins are like the cannisters on a kitchen shelf in which flour, sugar, and salt are stored; here there are bins for leaves, horse manure, sand, gravel, weeds, seaweed, and sheep and cow manure when we can get it. When shredding time or strength runs out in the fall, we pile unshredded leaves in a large wire bin, the first of three, so that in three years there is compost of a rough sort for general use in the woodland and on the hillside. This has been done unscientifically, without additional inoculants, letting nature do the work.

Wheelbarrows and trash barrels are indispensable parts of our gardening efforts—a wheelbarrow is taken to the various bins and individual ingredients put in by the bucketful, the choice of which bin and how much depending on whether the mix is for woodland plants in shade or for plants on the open hillside. For the rock garden the mix is made more fastidiously with only leaf mold (mainly oak since that is our principal tree) and helpings of peat, occasionally manure, and ample amounts of sand and bags of granite chick grit to provide good drainage.

Why do gardeners garden? Especially, why try so hard to grow temperamental plants with fussy requirements and unpredictable personalities? And what makes a plant a favorite? Summon the poets—let me count the ways. It is as irrational, personal, and idiosyncratic as the gardener's genes. Often I think I would give up a large section of a rock bed if I could have one perfect specimen of Androsace 'Millstream' or Physoplexis comosa, or have a fern return and flourish as Asplenium ceterach once did. For rock gardeners it has to do with delicacy, the structure of leaf and flower fitting together with a clock's perfection of parts, far too rigid a com-
parison for shapes so fragile. But contradiction leaps with every word: there is nothing visibly fragile about the cushion of a saxifrage—often a sturdy community of minute rosettes—but the flowers that open on the nearly invisible stems above that cushion are as thin in petal as silk, their very stature and texture speak of crystal air, high places, freedom, uniqueness. Nothing humdrum, nothing overdone or blowsy, or repeated too often. We wait for the blossoms, are enraptured by them, and then wait again for another season—fleeting, evanescent—all the qualities that are hard to capture or tame.

Plants from all the wild places—meadows, swamps, bogs, woodlands, as well as alpines—are there to satisfy the yearning for flowers that are slender rather than fat; unusual rather than commonplace; elegant and graceful rather than bulky. When an alpine is well grown, it is said to be “in character,” conforming to the ideal in the wild. Fertilizers, overwatering, too much cosseting, can change the height, the size of the flowers, the very look of the plant. An alpine generally needs to be only a few inches high; a woodland plant graceful, not heavy.

Plants from the wild are my weakness, it’s true, but I also garden just for the feel and the smell of it. Mere earth in spring can summon the heart as imperatively as the fragrance of any familiar flower. But the moment is at hand to reconcile the urge to grow plants with the need to spend more hours on other pursuits. Adjusting expectations, refocusing goals, coming to terms with what is rather than what is wished for—these are lessons I need to learn. No sooner said than the thought of a new planting of *Arisaema sikokianum* pops up or a bank of species azaleas to transform a boring corner. How not answer the challenge of convincing *Primula japonica* to settle in permanently by the stream? Who would willingly shun the prospect of more shrubs whose fragrance in season can suffuse the whole garden, or forego a recently discovered plant that quickens the blood?

Did I just imply moderation? Or use the word reconcile? As long as there’s life, let spring come and let me at the trowel!

**Suggested References**


Quarterly Bulletin of the Alpine Garden Society (Great Britain).

*Rock Garden Journal of the Scottish Rock Garden Club.*


Catherine Hull is a gardener and a lecturer on horticulture specializing in alpines, rock plants, and woodland wildflowers. She is a member of the North American Rock Garden Society and other plant societies. As a trustee of The Trustees of Reservations she is particularly interested in the Sedgewick Gardens at Long Hill. She has served on Harvard’s Visiting Committee to the Arnold Arboretum, where she has also worked as a volunteer.